Facing Facts: An Examination of Facebook Use and Privacy

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Abstract:

Facebook, the popular social networking site, is gaining recognition and approval worldwide, and changing communication more and more each day. Despite significant media attention on the possible negative consequences of Facebook use, the site continues to thrive. This study explores the correlation between the societal need for instant gratification and Facebook users’ disregard for online privacy; as well as uncovering whether users that are fully aware of the negative consequences, as it pertains to privacy concerns, would continue to frequent the site. This research also sought to discover whether users were more inclined to disclose personal information online as opposed to face-to-face. Five participants were selected to participate in circular questioning in order to address my research questions about Facebook use, privacy concerns and self disclosure. This method was chosen because it raises awareness of issues surrounding Facebook as well as inspiring change. Results support the idea that today, Facebook users are more inclined to disclose personal information online as opposed to face-to-face. Findings also show that although users are aware of the potential negative consequences, they still feel that they would continue to frequent the site, even if they personally experience an invasion of privacy. There is a correlation found during circular questioning between the disregard for online privacy and instant gratification. Limitations of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.
I. Introduction

With the overwhelming popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, we have to wonder whether this site is realistically a friend or foe. Our societal need for instant gratification via social networking sites is a topic that requires further investigation, is our impulsive sharing ultimately detrimental to reputations? There are many studies examining the privacy issues with Facebook, but there are no studies examining the correlation between our societal need for instant gratification and perceptions of privacy. I believe that our need to share information freely and receive information instantly is blinding us to possible privacy implications. What are the inevitable consequences of constantly seeking instant gratification? Delving deeper into this issue is important because the future is shaped by our actions in the present, and without examining the possible effects of our lax views towards privacy on Facebook we are perpetuating our eventual demise.

In today’s society, social networking sites are used to promote celebrities, businesses, products, etc. Through these sites information can be transmitted to millions of people all across the world instantly, but not all of this shared information is positive. A study conducted by Zeynep Tufekci (2008) uncovered that individuals who were not members of Facebook reported pressured to join the social networking site, even though they felt there was fundamentally nothing that interested them. We have been thrust into a world of computer-mediated communication, with little thought paid to the possible consequences of releasing private information. Social networking sites provide an outlet for individuals to speak freely, but what effect does this have on reputations and impression management?
Allowing ourselves to get caught up in the entertaining attributes of Facebook and disregard the possible dangers associated with the site. The purpose of the research was to remove the blinders and allow users to see the good and bad aspects of the site. The research examined how the theory of Instant Gratification pertains to the use of social networking sites like Facebook, specifically with respect to privacy concerns. This paper also provides theoretical implications for drawing a relevant connection between instant gratification and sharing information on Facebook, to encourage a much needed wave of awareness and vigilance towards privacy settings.

II. Synthesis of Literature

The following synthesis of literature begins with an exploration of the rapid evolution of Facebook and provides a deeper understanding of how the social networking site has become an essential element of college life. The investigation of privacy concerns associated with Facebook use starts with a brief description of the controversial news feed addition to Facebook, which leads into more in-depth studies focusing on users’ views towards privacy on the site. The synthesis continues with an examination of disclosure of personal information online versus face-to-face communication, connecting a sense of reality online to the actual reality offline. The next section uncovers the uses and gratifications associated with Facebook use, concluding with a critique of the literature reviewed.

Facebook and College Life

Facebook was originally created for, and restricted to, college students and required members to register using their email address provided by their school, which created a view of
Facebook as a safe space for students to share information with other students (Lange & Lampe, 2008). Since then the site has opened membership to any individual with an email address, which is why some users may falsely believe they are protected, encouraging them to provide private information, when in reality this is no longer the case (2008). Most studies used college students as the studies sample population, which makes sense considering the fact that college students are heavily enthralled in the social networking site (Tufekci, 2008; Catlett, 2007; Lange & Lampe, 2008; Debatin et al, 2009).

*News Feed Addition to Facebook.*

A common issue addressed in almost every study was the news feed addition to Facebook, which combined various status updates, photos, and other profile changes from all the users’ friends and displayed them on the home page (Catlett, 2007; Lange & Lampe, 2008; Boyd, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Lange and Lampe also found that members of Facebook were disturbed by the introduction of the news feed; it was revealed that many were surprised by the amount of information exposed, although the study did report that the feed did not disclose any information that was not readily accessible by the user’s friends before the new implementation (Lange & Lampe, 2008). This study also introduced the concept of instant gratification by revealing that the news feed addition was implemented with the intent to allow users to know when their friends made changes to their profiles immediately rather than requiring users to visit each friend’s profile to keep track of updates (2008). Boyd drew a distinction not mentioned by the other studies which was that the news feed forced members to think about how their posts could be misinterpreted by their friends, knowing that any action would be broadcast to everyone with whom they agreed to enter into a digital friendship (Boyd,
The study went on to assert that Facebook is profiting from society’s cognitive addiction to social information; because when the data is there, people are inclined to pay attention even if it does not matter to them (2008). Although this is an alarming piece of information, one should not disregard the positive features of Facebook.

The constructive aspect of the news feed addition was revealed in Catlett’s study, when she stated that the news feed was the main trigger that influenced many participants to alter the thickness of their privacy boundary (Catlett, 2007). This occurred because members were now aware of the extent of information readily available for all their friends and social network to see, which encouraged many to re-evaluate their personal settings (2007). Boyd asserted that the news feed made the material far more accessible and visible, which again ties back to the theory of instant gratification, because members want information immediately without having to spend time searching for it (Boyd, 2008). The study went on to find that the news feed makes no distinction between friends, all updates are shared with all friends equally; unlike in the real world where you usually choose to divulge an intimate detail to a close friend, Facebook makes all intimate details readily available for all friends to see (2008). What are possible implications of Facebook use with respect to personal privacy, and what are the underlying causes?

**Problems with Privacy Associated with Facebook Use**

Many studies attributed the problems surrounding privacy on Facebook to a certain level of ignorance regarding privacy settings available (Debatin et al., 2009; Lange & Lampe, 2008; Catlett, 2007; Metzger & Pure, 2009). One study stated that privacy concerns are raised when individuals are ignorant to the public nature of the internet, and fail to remember that every piece of information posted is available for others to see (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). An interesting
finding reported that members with thin boundaries around their profile generally had much less knowledge of their privacy controls, yet were more comfortable with their profiles at the same time (Catlett, 2007). One study disagreed with the idea of users being ignorant to privacy settings, and found that most students were mindful of their privacy settings and took measures to control the disclosure of private information on the Facebook profiles (Christofides, Muise & Desmarais, 2009). This raises a question of whether the underlying cause of this oversight is in fact ignorance or the belief that bad things only happen to other people.

In Facebook research, there is a prevalent concept of a third-person effect, which asserts that many people do not take an active role in maintaining online privacy due to ignorance of available settings, or simply may feel that problems with invasions of privacy may happen to other people, only (Lange & Lampe, 2008; Debatin et al., 2009). One study agreed that a third person effect is evident in measuring the potential risks of privacy invasion, but personal experience with invasions of privacy is what actually prompts users to take control of their privacy settings, as opposed to hearing about problems via second-hand information (Debatin et al., 2009). This creates an additional issue because members are turning a blind eye to the truly dangerous risks associated with their use of Facebook because they have not personally experienced a violation, but at that point it would be too late (2009). It appears that some users face a dilemma in finding a balance between over exposure and complete isolation.

The concept of a privacy paradox emerged in some of the studies, which found that there was a disconnect between the amount of information students wanted to share and their desire to protect their privacy (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Metzger & Pure, 2009; Debatin et al., 2009). This creates a cognitive dissonance when users are not as protected as they would like to be. One
study reported that the users’ high levels of privacy concerns did not match up with the low levels of protection, with only a minority actually implementing the available privacy settings (Metzger & Pure, 2009). The study went on to assert that users are forced to weigh their options before making a decision, because there are some situations when protecting privacy is more important and others when disclosure is more important (2009).

Some studies linked Facebook use to the Communication Privacy Management theory, which provides the theoretical framework needed for understanding Facebook’s online privacy controls (Catlett, 2007; Metzger & Pure, 2009). One study found that members manage their personal privacy by setting boundaries and maintaining a tension between public and private, allowing users to remain in control of their information (Catlett, 2007). On Facebook, this entails managing the way users communicate with other users as well as how they choose to manage their own personal information (2007). It was revealed that members have the ability to decide what, and how much, information they want exposed on their profiles and can heighten or lower their privacy settings at any time (2007).

A problem arises because the default privacy settings tend to err on the side of permissiveness rather than protection, which can cause users to over-disclose to people with who they may not have wanted to share information (Lange & Lampe, 2008). The fact that members use their real identities on Facebook, and often disclose their full names, as well as personally identifying photos, may increase susceptibility to various attacks on their physical and online personas (2008). Users recall that Facebook was created to unite college students and assume a safe space that truly does not exist at this time, which is why users often disclose a surprising amount of personal information on their profiles (2008). One study offered a few possible
solutions to the issues surrounding privacy: choosing not to disclose certain information, limiting who has access to certain parts of their profile, as well as limiting who users request and accept as a friend (Metzger & Pure, 2009).

A common concern with privacy transpires because members are aware of the privacy settings’ availability, yet often do not make use of them. In one survey, an alarming 89 percent of participants reported not having read the privacy policy on Facebook (Debatin et al., 2009). Privacy would not be such a great concern if users were more vigilant with whom they add as a friend. With 38 percent of users boasting over 300 friends, alarming is the fact 10 percent admitted to accepting any friendship request on the site (2009). One study acknowledged that young individuals are willing to take risks with their profiles, because the perceived benefits of use seem to outweigh the perceived risks (Lange & Lampe, 2008). The study went on to conclude that members of Facebook often feel that the ability to find connections with others is very important, whereas believe the chances of being targeted by a stalker or having a future employer access their profile are relatively low (2008). The reality is that with less than 25 percent of users actually adjusting their privacy settings, the chances of information getting into the wrong hands is significantly high (Metzger & Pure, 2009). Metzger and Pure’s study went on to reveal the benefits often associated with disclosure which includes relationship development and social validation, and the risks associated with disclosure include loss of social or relational status, embarrassment and even risks to physical safety (2009).

The prevalence of gossip and rumors as a consequence to Facebook use was observed in certain studies conducted amongst the college students (Debatin et al., 2009; Tufekci, 2008). Interviews uncovered that individuals had personal experiences with gossip and rumors as a
result of their updates and pictures being taken out of context (Debatin et al., 2009), which was also a concern presented by Boyd in her examination of the implications of the news feed addition (Boyd, 2008). She asserted that individuals were forced to think two steps ahead into the possible consequences of posting their private information on their profiles, while remaining mindful of the possible interpretations others could develop (2008). Another study reported that users acknowledged certain information should not be public knowledge and users should not post anything that can come back to haunt them later in life, causing the necessity for widespread damage control (Debatin et al., 2009). Considering the severity of the possible consequences of Facebook use, what is it that motivates users to participate in the site?

Disclosure: Online v. Face-to-Face

A study comparing communication online versus face-to-face communication found that the technical and social characteristics of social networking sites, like Facebook, enable relationships to flourish using similar functions typically performed by face-to-face communication (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2009). For example, during face-to-face communication individuals are able to decide whether they are interested in pursuing a relationship with others based upon the appearance projected; similarly, Facebook users assert their identity to others through comments and pictures posted (2009). This study focused on how members of Facebook use the site to maintain current relationships as opposed to initiating new relationships, in contrast to the Sheldon and Honeycutt study that examined how people, who are afraid of face-to-face communication, go online to form new relationships with others (Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2008).
Sheldon and Honeycutt’s study investigated how the degree of unwillingness-to-communicate in face-to-face interactions impacts three motives for Facebook use: relationship maintenance, passing time, and virtual community (2008). The initial discussion focused on how those afraid to communicate face-to-face use Facebook to pass time when they felt bored or lonely and asserted that online relationships provided minimal social risk, which increased probability for self-disclosure (2008). After further examination, the researchers found that respondents’ main motivation for use was to maintain relationships with others, which is similar to the findings in the previous study conducted by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2009).

The next article utilized a completely different approach to analyzing self-disclosure online using the concept of fluency, which is a meta-cognitive cue that favors tasks which provides ease when processing relevant information (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). The study found that participants felt information found online provided them with a sense of fluency, which is why a questionnaire distributed online elicited more honesty and disclosure than the same questionnaire administered in person (2009). They stated that individuals were more inclined to divulge personal information online than when they communicate face-to-face, which puts them at risk for identity theft, privacy breaches, and Internet fraud (2009). The researchers agreed with the previous studies asserting that self-disclosure is inherently risky, but found users were more likely to disclose information because they felt a sense of privacy on Facebook (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2009).
Uses and Gratifications Associated with Facebook Use.

An interesting finding shared by a majority of the studies revealed peer pressure as a primary motivating factor for joining Facebook (Tufekci, 2008; Catlett, 2007; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). The study found students who initially had no intention of joining the social networking site felt pressure from peers to join and some reported feeling a need to join the site because it was constantly the topic of conversation (Tufekci, 2008; Catlett, 2007). One study found Facebook use so embedded in the typical college students’ ecology, that to not join would lead to social death (Debatin et al, 2009). In this study, 119 college students were surveyed and 29 percent reported that their Facebook account is always open or active when they are online and 23 percent admitted to checking their Facebook at least five times a day (2009). It appears as if Facebook has become an obsession amongst college students, who then pressure other individuals to join the site, thus perpetuating the obsession with accumulating friends.

A commonly reported motivation for joining Facebook amongst participants was the desire to reconnect with old friends, family, and peers (Tufekci, 2008; Debatin et al., 2009; Catlett, 2007; Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Heavy users of Facebook expressed their use of the site was driven by their curiosity as to the lives of people from their past and whether these individuals had changed (Tufekci, 2008). One study stated Facebook is used to maintain existing offline relationships not to form new relationships, although the existing relationships may be weak (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). One study found there was no association between use of Facebook and relationships with close friends, although it was uncovered that the number of friends students kept in touch with was significantly associated with use of the site (Tufekci, 2008). An interesting finding appeared in the Lange and Lampe
study which found participants reported that sometimes they learn things about people they never would have otherwise (Lange & Lampe, 2008); which was also supported by Christofides, Muise and Desmarais who found students were significantly more likely to disclose personal information on Facebook as opposed to face-to-face (Christofides, Muise & Desmarais, 2009).

One study’s interview revealed an interesting characteristic of Facebook, which stated that it allowed users to socialize without physically being social, which increased use as a means of convenience (Debatin et al., 2009). The site allows users to retrieve phone numbers, email addresses, and send messages to other people instantly, without having to personally ask around for certain information (2009). Having the ability to communicate with friends and family members at other universities, in other states, or even other countries, was an extremely useful attribute of Facebook praised by many users (Catlett, 2007). One study found that not all students are interested in reuniting with people from their past. One participant reported frustration with old high school peers requesting her friendship on Facebook, and went on to state that she did not understand why after all the years without communication they would suddenly demonstrate interest in her life (Tufekci, 2008).

Presentation of self is a common motivation linked to Facebook use and users identities are often tied to their Facebook personas (Lange & Lampe, 2008). Lange and Lampe’s study found individuals who are dedicated to maintaining a good impression in their profiles often avoid putting every aspect of their life on Facebook (2008). Social grooming is an aspect of Facebook, often guiding users’ participation; users want to put their best face forward and utilize their online profiles to do so (Tufekci, 2008). An element of voyeurism was introduced in Tufekci’s study when a majority of users explained the gratifications associated with learning
about the lives of their friends and even strangers, becoming lost in the endless profiles streaming before their eyes (2008). Some participants in the study disagreed with this view and felt confused by the desire to look at the lives of others as opposed to living their own life (2008). The concept of voyeurism was also examined by Boyd when she revealed, at a base level most people have a voyeuristic streak and our biological programming makes us believe people who are divulging personal information are indicating trust (Boyd, 2008). She goes on to assert, friendships are built on mutual knowledge of each other’s lives and the lives of people they may know; thus, social and emotional support emerges as a positive outcome of Facebook use (2008).

Many students agreed Facebook takes a lot of the work out of meeting people, which allowed them to stay social even with a busy schedule (Tufekci, 2008). The convenience element was a prevailing theme and users were thankful for the ability to connect with classmates in order to retrieve notes they may have missed from class as well as updating a large number of people instantly on new developments in their lives (2008). However, one study found there is a difference between an evolving address book and the list of people an individual actually pays attention to on a daily basis (Boyd, 2008). Her study declared that although Facebook gives the gift of infinite social information, this can often be precious initially but destructive long-term (2008).

_Critique of Past Literature_

Although the above literature does examine the privacy concerns associated with Facebook and gratifications related to use of the site, it does not specifically identify how our societal need for instant gratification influences the information we choose to share online. Thus, while it does serve to inform as to the prevalent issues such invasions of privacy and damage to
reputations, it lacks an element of insight into how the immediacy drives us to use, and at times abuse, the social networking site. The research examining preference of online communication as opposed to face-to-face communication uncovers an interesting dynamic of the use of social networking sites and gratification, while also showing perceptions of privacy contributes to disclosure of personal information (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2009). My research study explored whether Facebook users’ were more inclined to disclose personal information on Facebook as opposed to face-to-face. Due to the short time frame this site has been available for use, scholars are unable to have more longitudinal studies examining the long-term consequences associated with use of the site as it pertains to privacy. Many of the studies reviewed sought to uncover problems with privacy on the site (Debatin et al., 2009; Lange & Lampe, 2008; Catlett, 2007; Metzger & Pure, 2009), and common uses and gratifications associated with Facebook use (Tufekci, 2008; Debatin et al., 2009; Catlett, 2007; Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), but failed to uncover a correlation between lax views of privacy and desire for instant gratification. My research served to uncover any possible correlation between instant gratification and Facebook use, especially as it pertains to views of privacy, providing a new perspective in Facebook research. Thus, my research questions were as follows:

1. Are users more inclined to disclose personal information online through Facebook than offline through face-to-face communication?

This explored whether perceptions of privacy on Facebook encouraged users to divulge more information on the site than they would in face-to-face communication. From this question, findings determined whether users were more likely to share information with
certain individuals within their online network of friends that they otherwise would not share during face-to-face communication.

2. If users are fully aware of the possible negative consequences of Facebook use, as it pertains to privacy concerns, would they continue to frequent the site?

This question examined whether individuals were aware of the possible negative consequences of Facebook use such as invasions of privacy, identity theft, and hacking. If users reported awareness of the potential dangers of the social networking site, I then uncovered if they would continue to frequent the site, or would deactivate their online accounts.

3. What is the relationship between Facebook users’ disregard for online privacy and instant gratification?

Responses provided the foundation for exploration of users’ unconscious desire for instant gratification, and uncovered a correlation between disregard for privacy on Facebook and instant gratification.

III. Methodologies

Procedures

In order to address the research questions about Facebook use, privacy concerns, and self disclosure, Qualitative research in the form of circular questioning was implemented. Circular questioning allowed participants to explain their responses to the interview questions in-depth and focus on their feelings about the use of Facebook, as well as understanding possible
implications associated with the site which are often overlooked. Circular questioning also assisted in raising awareness of potential concerns addressed in the research questions, as well as encouraged a much needed shift away from over-disclosure.

Circular questioning allowed one-on-one interviews of carefully selected participants to examine their personal experiences and feelings towards Facebook (See Appendix I). Wenshan Jia defined circular questioning as “an unconventional approach to family therapy and organizational and community consultation” (Jia, 2001, p.91). He went on to describe this method as “a product of the intellectual transformation of modern knowledge” and referred to circular questioning as “a tool for change” (Jia, 2001, p. 93). This method was selected because the intention of this study was to raise awareness of issues surrounding Facebook, as well as bring about change. Circular questioning differs from other forms of interviewing because it tends to revolve around general curiosity about potential connectedness of events that include the problem, as opposed to the precise origins of the problems (Jia, 2001). The questions were separated into six categories: Facebook use, feelings towards Facebook, immediacy of Facebook, online disclosure versus face-to-face, legitimacy for concerns about privacy, and change. Implementation of this method raised awareness of the potential unexpected consequences associated with the site, and after reviewing the individual interviews inductive inferences were made as to the potential relationship between Facebook use and instant gratification. Upon review of the responses the relevance of the attribution theory was also noted, which will be explained in detail in the discussion section.
Participants

An informed consent form for participants was created so that they would understand the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as to explain that their responses would be anonymous and there are no foreseeable risks associated with their participation (See Appendix II). Participants between the ages of 18 and 25 were recruited, including current college students and recent college graduates, who are currently on Facebook or have previously used the site. A convenience sample was selected because of easy access to individuals from various colleges throughout Southern California who meet the criteria indicated. Some participants had reservations against the use of an audio recording device during the interviews, so the interviews were transcribed by hand. The one-on-one circular questioning interviews were conducted at a relatively private setting which will allowed participants to share their feelings comfortably, in a setting that was convenient for them.

IV. Results

Each participant answered questions that were separated into six main categories; (1) questions about Facebook use, (2) questions about feelings towards Facebook, (3) questions about the immediacy of Facebook, (4) questions about online disclosure v. face-to-face communication, (5) questions about the legitimacy for concerns about privacy, and (6) questions about change.

Questions about Facebook Use

The introductory section of circular questioning sought to uncover how active participants were on Facebook and their objectives while using the site. Significant similarities
were found in participant responses when asked how often they log onto Facebook; three out of the five participants admitted to logging onto Facebook at least four to five times per day. One participant responded: “I leave it on even when I’m not using it actively, so pretty much I’m logged on to Facebook all day long”. All but one participant answered that on average, they spend a couple hours a day on Facebook. When respondents were asked to identify what they typically do on the site, there was a small observed variation in the responses, but common activities included reading status updates, viewing photos and chatting with friends. All respondents admitted to finding Facebook distracting at times, but for different reasons. Although the reasoning for feeling distracted did vary a bit for participants, most responses admitted to getting easily distracted when they were bored.

Questions about Feelings towards Facebook

All participants felt one positive attribute of Facebook was how it made it easy to keep in touch with friends and family, which also emerged amongst participants as a primary reason for joining the site. One participant responded: “I like that I can see pictures people post on Facebook, so even if I have a friend or family member that I cannot see often in person I can still stay updated on their life based on what they post on Facebook”. As for a negative aspect of Facebook, three out of five respondents did not like that other users snoop around on their profiles looking for information about them. Despite this negative aspect, all participants reported having positive feelings associated with their Facebook use.
Questions about the Immediacy of Facebook

This section primarily focused on the news feed addition to Facebook discussed earlier in the review of literature section, which compiles the recent or most popular updates from all Facebook friends onto one home page when the user logs on. All participants indicated that they liked the news feed addition to Facebook, which was primarily attributed to the easy access to the information they want to see about their friends. One participant stated how initially he disliked the news feed addition until he learned that he could block updates from individuals he did not wish to know about. Responses varied significantly when asked about negative consequences associated with the news feed addition. Only one participant replied that there are not any negative consequences associated with the news feed. Some negative consequences evident during circular questioning were the loss of control over what is visible to mutual friends, too many annoying posts, and the prevalence of offensive comments. A significant finding was that all participants enjoyed the immediacy of sharing information on Facebook.

Questions about Online Disclosure v. Face-to-Face

When participants were asked if they share information on Facebook they would not otherwise share face-to-face, every respondent answered no. They then went on to state that although they do not do this personally, they do believe that other people do. When asked why they felt this was the case, two of the five participants felt people would do this for attention or to impress people. Another couple of participants stated that people are often very confrontational on Facebook because they feel safe and comfortable behind their computer, but face-to-face confrontation does not provide them with the same sense of security. When asked how Facebook has changed communication, all but one respondent felt that the site has made communication
more informal and many felt that today we are very reliant upon Facebook to communicate with others, whereas before people would call or see someone in person.

**Questions about Legitimacy for Concerns about Privacy**

When participants were asked their opinion about the privacy settings available on Facebook, responses ranged from neutral feelings to positive feelings with only two respondents commenting on negative aspects of the privacy settings. What these participants did not like is how Facebook shares your information with online marketers for a profit. Participants liked how the settings allowed users to restrict access to their profiles by setting it to private. Two participants had personally experienced an invasion of privacy on Facebook, but continued to use the site because they felt it was not significant enough to warrant leaving Facebook. In fact, only one respondent replied indicating she would delete her Facebook if she ever experienced an invasion of privacy. The other respondents stated they would simply change their settings to prevent a future invasion of privacy. When participants were asked if they felt some people would regret the amount of information they post on the site, three out of the five felt some individuals might regret the amount of personal information they disclose on the site. The other two respondents stated that users choose what they wish to disclose online, so they know what they are getting themselves into ahead of time.

**Questions about Change**

This section sought to uncover whether the circular questioning methodology was effective in encouraging participants to think critically about their use of Facebook, as well as highlight the possible negative consequences associated with the site. Participants were asked to
offer suggestions for controlling disclosure on Facebook; many suggested that users should think about what they are posting before they put something incriminating or portray themselves in a bad light. When asked how Facebook users can avoid invasions of privacy on the site, almost all participants reiterated the importance of implementing privacy settings and restricting profiles. Upon thorough review of the responses from circular questioning, the participants, it seemed, were actually becoming more aware of their potentially dangerous online behavior. For example, a participant was asked about if she thought people might regret the amount of personal information they disclose on Facebook, she initially responded: “I think some people don’t realize how many people see the information they post online,” but then went on to add “I personally have 560 friends on Facebook and most of them are acquaintances. Sometimes I forget who is even on my friends’ list and post things without thinking who is going to see it” (#101, May 09, 2011). Thus, she focused the attention on herself and recognized that at times she discloses without thinking about who she is sharing her personal information with. The self-reflexive responses received through implementation of circular questioning supported the initial purpose for conducting this study, which was aimed at raising awareness of possible problems with Facebook and inducing change.

*Findings Related to Research Questions*

With regard to the first research question, which sought to uncover whether users were more inclined to disclose personal information online through Facebook than offline through face-to-face communication, all participants felt whatever they disclose online they would also disclose face-to-face. However, all participants went on to say they feel that others do disclose personal information online they would not otherwise share face-to-face, which brings to light the
attrition theory. Attribution Theory states that there is evidence for a self-serving effect in the attribution of success but not in the attribution of failure, and an important characteristic of this theory is how people will often interpret their environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image (Zuckerman, 1979). Respondents maintained a positive self-image by stating they would never disclose information online they would not disclose face-to-face, yet were quick to comment that others do engage in this type of behavior. An interesting finding reflected how participants felt that some users opt to engage in confrontational communication online as opposed to face-to-face because they feel safe knowing that the other person cannot really do anything to harm them at that moment. Therefore, the study found that although the participants felt they do not disclose more online than face-to-face, they did believe others engaged in this type of behavior.

The second research question sought to uncover whether users who were fully aware of the possible negative consequences of Facebook use, as it pertains to privacy concerns, would continue to frequent the site. The findings suggest that all participants are aware of the possible negative consequences of the site, but continue to frequent Facebook despite this knowledge. Furthermore, participants who had personally experienced invasions of privacy on Facebook admitted that they still frequent the site and commented that leaving the site is unnecessary because one can simply change their settings to prevent future privacy problems. Only one participant stated she would not continue to frequent the site if she experienced an invasion of privacy. Considering the constant media attention on problems with privacy on Facebook, all participants surprisingly displayed such little concern for potential invasions of privacy.
The final research question aimed to find a relationship between Facebook users’ disregard for online privacy settings and instant gratification. The study results showed all participants enjoyed the immediacy of sharing information on Facebook, and responded they were very pleased with how convenient it is to find out about the lives of others due to the news feed addition to Facebook. During the circular question section focused on privacy concerns, one participant responded he would not leave the site if he experienced an invasion of privacy because, “there is a lot more good than bad on Facebook” (#102, May 13, 2011). This illustrates a correlation between users’ desire for instant gratification, which represents the “good” aspect of Facebook, and users’ disregard for the legitimate negative consequences of Facebook use as it pertains to privacy concerns, which would represent the “bad” aspect of the site.

V. Discussion

After careful analysis of the circular questioning responses, discussing the implications of instant gratification theory, which emerged in this study, is important. First, how the theory of instant gratification affects use of Facebook will be examined. Today, we live in a society reliant on the notion that we can have access to the exact information we want, whenever we want it. Social networking sites, like Facebook, facilitate the growing demand for instant gratification, but drawing a line is important. What are the inevitable consequences of constantly seeking instant gratification? When the participants were asked if they like the immediacy of sharing information on Facebook, the overwhelming response was yes, but some ambivalence towards this question with two participants was noted. When these two participants were questioned about their hesitation, one participant stated that although she did like the immediacy of sharing information on Facebook, she thought sometimes the information shared was overkill. One
participant took a minute to reflect, and then stated: “Yes, I do like the immediacy of Facebook, but now I feel like I’m almost dependent on it” (#101, May 09, 2011). This is why it is important to bring to light the implications of instant gratification as it pertains to Facebook use, before we perpetuate a cycle of reliance on social networking sites to feed our need for instant gratification.

Some limitations of this study arise due to complication with the research proposal to the Institutional Review Board. The unanticipated delay in processing the application did not allow for the use of the mixed-methodology approach implementing survey research as had been initially intended, which would have allowed for a larger sample size and quantitative data. Also, certain responses could have been altered in an attempt for participants to maintain a satisfactory level of social desirability.

VI. Conclusion

The research findings prove the hypothesis that today Facebook users are more inclined to disclose personal information online as opposed to face-to-face, although participants attributed this type of behavior to others, not themselves. The negative implications associated with Facebook use as it pertains to privacy concerns was a very important aspect of this study, and the findings were surprising. Although users were aware of the potential negative consequences, they still felt they would continue to frequent the site, even if they personally experienced an invasion of privacy. There was a correlation between the disregard for online privacy and instant gratification found during circular questioning, which was linked to the perception that the positive characteristics of Facebook outweighed the negative characteristics. Future research should examine the prevalence of confrontational communication online versus confrontational communication face-to-face, to determine if today’s social media society has influenced a shift in
confrontational communication styles using a larger sample size. Researchers should also look into how attribution theory factors into Facebook users’ presentation of their online identities, to further the findings of this study that users felt that although they did not participate in over-disclosure on the site, others did.

VII. Acknowledgements

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References


Catlett, J. L. (2007). An analysis of female university students’ communicative management of privacy online via Facebook" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the NCA 93rd Annual Convention, TBA, Chicago, IL.*


Participant #101. Interview conducted on May 09, 2011.

Participant #102. Interview conducted on May 13, 2011.


**Appendix I. Qualitative Method- Circular Questioning**

1. Questions about Facebook use:
   a. How often do you log onto Facebook?
   b. How much time do you usually spend on Facebook?
   c. Can you describe what you typically do on Facebook?
   d. Do you ever find yourself distracted by Facebook?
   e. Can you describe why?

2. Questions about feelings towards Facebook?
   a. Why did you join Facebook?
   b. What do you enjoy about Facebook?
c. What do you dislike about Facebook?

d. How would you describe the emotions and feelings associated with Facebook use?

3. Questions about the immediacy of Facebook:
   a. How do you feel about the news feed addition to Facebook?
   b. In your opinion, what socially undesirable consequences has the news feed addition brought about?
   c. Do you enjoy the immediacy of sharing information on Facebook?

4. Questions about online disclosure v. face-to-face:
   a. Do you feel that you share more information on Facebook than in face-to-face communication?
   b. Why do you think this is the case?
   c. What type of information do you share with your Facebook friends that you would not share face-to-face?
   d. In your opinion, how has Facebook altered the style of communication?

5. Questions about legitimacy for concerns about privacy?
   a. How do you feel about the privacy settings available on Facebook?
   b. Can you describe an experience with an invasion of privacy on Facebook?
   c. How did it make you feel?
   d. Do you think that people may regret the amount of personal information they disclose on the site?
   e. If you experienced an invasion of privacy (hacking, spam, etc.) on Facebook would you continue to use the site?
   f. Can you explain why?

6. Questions about change:
   a. Do you have any suggestions for controlling disclosure on Facebook?
b. How do you think Facebook users can avoid invasions of privacy on the site?

c. Do you have any additional comments?