A Sociological Examination of Gossip in an Increasingly Technological Era

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A Sociological Examination
Of Gossip
In an Increasingly Technological Era

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the alteration of gossip as a result of new technology. Specifically, this study examines the social implications of Facebook, a popular social networking website, on college students using the Boston College undergraduate population as a lens to study the college student population in general. Drawing from the theories of Simmel, Mead, and Goffman, and others, I outline how college students present themselves on Facebook’s online environment. I employed a mixed-method research approach, collecting data from a survey of Boston College undergraduates and, subsequently, conducting a series of in-depth face-to-face interviews in order to gain an understanding of how Facebook altered the social scene and, specifically, how Facebook affects gossip.

Facebook is a communication tool widely used by college students in order to present themselves online and maintain relationships. I found that due to the pervasive nature of Facebook, in junction with the simplicity of posting information about oneself and others on Facebook, an important shift occurs in which private matters are publicized to a large audience. This shift facilitates the flow of gossip amongst college students.
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I. INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Before I determined the topic of my undergraduate thesis, I thought about matters that are important to me. I carefully considered various life experiences, classes that I have taken in college, people that I have met, and world issues. Deciding none of these considerations would suffice, I realized that I wanted to research an everyday phenomenon; I was interested in studying something simple yet consequential. After this realization, I quickly decided to write about gossip.

Like most other people, I have had countless experiences with gossip. My first recollection of gossip is from second grade, when a friend told classmates at our elementary school that I still played with Power Ranger action figures. Since then, my memories involving gossip are plentiful. In fourth grade I revealed news to the school bus that my friend had a crush on a certain girl; in eighth grade false word was spread that I regularly plucked my eyebrows; in high school I was haunted by gossip circulating regarding my brother's alleged drug use. My familiarity with gossip is anything but unique, however. Everyone experiences gossip in their lifetimes, and most people experience it on a daily basis.

It is this pervasiveness, this universality of gossip that sparks my interest in the matter. I figured that due to its ever-present nature, gossip must have a cause, a meaning, and various social implications. This study
sets out to determine the social significance of gossip in a highly technological society.

**Gossip**

Before delving into any sociological discussion or analysis of gossip, it will be helpful to first define the topic of interest. For the purposes of this study, I will use a modification of Kate Fox’s definition of gossip: “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting” who may or may not be present. This communication typically contains an undertone or assumption of secrecy or privacy. It is important to note that the communication can have a positive, negative, or neutral message about the target of gossip. Also vital is that the gossip can be about oneself: people often gossip to others about their own personal issues. I like Fox’s definition of gossip more than other definitions because it uses the term “communication” rather than “talk” or “speech.” With this definition, letters, emails, social network posts, and text messages can qualify as gossip.

It is important to distinguish gossip from its closely related relative, rumor. Several sociologists have explained the difference between these two terms, but Jorg Bergmann presents the most compelling differentiation in his book *Discreet Indiscretions*. He suggests that rumor refers to information that is disseminated in all directions but does not have a known source or origin. Bergmann presents two classical cases of rumor: (1) the imminent end of the world, and (2) the cooking of rats in fast-food restaurants. But
while rumors contain unauthorized messages that are of universal interest, gossip possesses relevance only for a specific group and is disseminated in a highly selective manner within a fixed social network (70).

Bergmann also maintains that “any sociological attempt to understand gossip must live with the fact that, long before sociology appeared on the scene and made it the subject of scientific investigation, gossip was a social phenomenon of daily life…” (1). In other words, gossip has been around for a long, long time. It is also omnipresent, and part of human nature. We experience it every day when we talk to our friends, family, and coworkers. We read gossip in the newspapers, tabloids, and on the internet. Recently entire websites were created that revolve around gossip, such as perezhilton.com (celebrity gossip) and formerly juicycampus.com (college campus gossip). As humans, we gossip so much that we do not even think about it; it is implicit and obvious in everyday life.

Not only is gossip pervasive in everyday life, but humans engage in gossip from an early age. Sociologist Gary Fine claims that “children gossip practically from the time they learn to talk and to recognize other people… [And] this does not diminish with age” (Arluke and Levine 39). The pervasiveness of gossip makes the concept pertinent for our world to examine. Because gossip is so common and inescapable, it must have a cause and significance. Since individuals of all ages engage in gossip frequently during their lifetimes, it is important to try to understand the reasons for and
implications of gossip. Often, however, the obvious tends to be the least considered. Social Psychologist Ralph Rosnow understands the importance of studying gossip, noting that “although both rumor and gossip are as ubiquitous as the air we breathe, they are seldom examined in social psychology or general textbooks” (Kowalski 224). This study seeks to examine and analyze everyday gossip from a sociological viewpoint.

Gossip has been impacted by a rise in the use of social networking websites, especially among college students. As we will see, the widespread use of such technology has implications on social interaction which affect gossip trends.

**Social Networking Websites**

While gossip has been a part of human interaction for centuries, technology such as social networking websites has only recently hit the social scene. However, this does not discredit its popularity. Research shows that 92% of today’s college students use social networking websites, and two-thirds of today’s college students use these social networking sites on a daily basis (Williamson).

With more than 400 million global users, Facebook is by far the most widely used social networking website in the world (“Top 20”). By 2007, about 85% of college students used Facebook, and this number has likely increased significantly over the past few years. According to Alexa’s 2010 statistics, Facebook currently trails only Google as the second most trafficked
website in the world. These facts emphasize the widespread use of technology, social networking websites, and specifically Facebook. Today we take it for granted; we do not even think about how often we use the internet. It is difficult for college students to imagine college life as it occurred just ten or fifteen years ago when college students did not have access to such technology.

Before exploring the social implications Facebook, it will be helpful to first summarize what Facebook is and why it is popular. Facebook is an online environment that allows users to create personalized profiles that portray information about themselves to others. The appeal of Facebook lies in its ability as a social networking website to connect people. Once a user joins a certain network, such as a university or a city, everyone in that network can view that individual’s Facebook page. Similarly, if a user adds or accepts another user as his “friend,” both parties can view one another’s profiles.

Users can display a plethora of information about themselves under the “Information” tab of their Facebook profile, including their name, birthday, hometown, interests, activities, favorite books, favorite music, and favorite movies. In addition, Facebook allows users to maintain a list of friends and choose privacy settings to tailor who has access to their profile. Users can also upload photos with the option of commenting on the photos and “tagging” friends who are pictured. Once a person is tagged in a photo,
that photo will appear on their Facebook profile under the “Photos of me” section. Users then have the option of removing the picture from their profile, a process known as “detagging.” Finally, Facebook provides interactive online chatting, private messaging, and the ability to write on friends’ “walls.” Wall posts are comments that remain indefinitely posted on one’s Facebook page until intentionally deleted by the poster or the owner of the Facebook page.

Technological advancements such as Facebook can often have significant social implications. In his book America Calling, Claude Fischer maintains that modernization transformed private life, altering personal ties, community life, and culture (4). Using the telephone as his central example of a turn-of-the-century technology that changed North American’s way of life, Fischer argues that while new technology alters the conditions of daily life, it does not determine the character of that life. Rather, people use new technological devices for various purposes, purposes that the inventors and producers of such technology would have never imagined. Fischer states, “As much as people adapt their lives to the changed circumstances created by a new technology, they also adapt that technology to their lives” (5). Throughout the book, Fischer portrays how the telephone, which was once intended as a business and emergency device, was transformed into a communication device used to connect friends and family.
To illustrate this point, let us examine a more modern, easily understandable example of such a use of technology. Few would argue with the fact that the cell phone primarily serves as a communication device. However, people do not let this primary purpose dictate their use of the device: many people use their cell phones not only as a communication device, but also as a watch, calendar, and alarm clock, along with various other uses. This phenomenon proves Fischers claim that people adapt technology to their own lives for their own purposes.

Likewise, Facebook was introduced as a communication device to connect friends over the internet. People today, however, use Facebook for a variety of reasons, such as maintaining photo albums, playing online games, promoting events, and receiving and disseminating gossip.

**Facebook’s Effect on Gossip**

While there has been heavy sociological research conducted on the topics of gossip and Facebook independently, there has not been abundant sociological research on how the recent Facebook frenzy has affected gossip trends and impacted on human interaction. This study aims to bring gossip and Facebook together and explain how the new technology has affected gossip, which in turn shapes the way humans interact. My central finding is that the pervasiveness of Facebook coupled with the simplicity of posting information about oneself and others on Facebook creates a shift from private to public; what were once considered private matters are now broadcasted on
a public forum to an extremely large audience. Consequently, it is easier for members of society to participate in gossip. Technology in this sense has not only increased the frequency of gossip, it has also changed the way gossip is circulated. Gossip still functions the same way, but technology facilitates the flow of gossip so that it is more public rather than private.
II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

A. Sociological Theory

_Simmel_

My theoretical perspective was formed largely by social psychologists and symbolic interactionists like George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. These theorists' works were heavily influenced by the work of Georg Simmel, a first generation German sociologist who was concerned at the microsociological level with social actions and interactions. Thus, a brief discussion of Simmel's work is necessary to lay the foundation for later theorists' works.

In “The Field of Sociology” Simmel asserts that society is ordinarily considered “permanent interactions only,” such as the structures of family, church, state, and organizations. However, Simmel argues that the less conspicuous relationships and interactions, which on the surface appear to be negligible, are what produce society as we know it (9). For Simmel, this is “sociation” – “the form in which individuals grow together into units that satisfy their interests” (41). It is the “the whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another,” which may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, that tie men together and provide the “color and consistency of social life” (10). Simmel claims that society is the name for individuals connected by interaction, and through this interaction, society becomes a unit. Technology, says Simmel, is not inherently social, but
becomes a factor in sociation when it transforms isolated individuals into “specific forms of being with and for one another” through interaction (41). Due to Simmel’s influence on other sociologists, his notions on sociation, and his assertion on technology, Simmel’s work is helpful in facilitating discussion about social interaction, which is an integral focus in my study.

Drawing influence from Simmel, twentieth-century sociologist Erving Goffman provides a framework for studying social interaction that can be applied to social networking websites and illuminate our understanding of Facebook. Goffman was primarily concerned with how people present themselves in the presence of others and the roles individuals assume in various social settings. Before discussing Goffman’s framework, however, I will briefly touch on other theories that guide Goffman’s work, symbolic interactionism and social psychology.

**Social Psychology and Symbolic Interactionism**

According to Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society*, social psychology explains the conduct of individuals in terms of the organized conduct of an entire social group, not vice versa (7). Social psychology, then, is interested in how the social group determines and affects the experience and conduct of individuals (Mead 1). Related to social psychology is symbolic interactionism, a theoretical approach in sociology which emphasizes the role of symbols and language as core elements of all human interaction.
Symbolic interactionism centers on the notion that people act toward things based on the things’ meanings, and these meanings are a result of social interaction and modified through personal interpretation. Mead asserts that intelligence of the mind arises through “the internalization by the individual of social processes of experience and behavior, that is, through this internalization of the conversation of significant gestures, as made possible by the individual’s taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward what is being thought about” (191-192) and that the mind cannot develop without language (192). Mead also asserts that the notion of self is not inherent at birth, but rather arises as a result of social interaction with others (135).

Mead argues that self-consciousness results from reflection when an individual adopts the perspective of valued others towards himself. The subjective experience of self, therefore, is the developmental outcome of human intersubjectivity. In communicating with others, an individual is another before he is a self. In addressing himself in the role of another, his self arises in experience. Only by taking the attitudes of others towards oneself, Mead asserts, can one become an object to himself (226).

Mead illustrates this point by differentiating the “I” and the “me.” Mead says that “the ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized ‘me,’ and then
one reacts toward that as an ‘I’” (175). It is this concept of the “generalized other” that makes Mead an important theorist in analyzing self-presentation and social interaction online.

**Goffman**

Famous sociologist and symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman was particularly interested in the way people present themselves to others. According to Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, individuals’ performances in social situations are based on their conception of how people in similar roles are supposed to act and the immediate feedback they receive from others in their presence. He explains that social interaction is like a theatrical performance in which individuals are actors who are in constant dialogue with an audience. Like stage actors, individuals attempt to establish and maintain favorable impressions believable to their audience. The audience can either believe the performance or remain unconvinced, correspondingly expressing approval or disapproval to the actor. Due to this ability to provide such feedback, Goffman asserts that individuals often attempt to give off an impression that is favorable or idealized in society: “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (35).

Goffman goes on to say that if an individual attempts to express the “ideal standards” during his performance, then he must relinquish or conceal
action that is inconsistent with these standards (41). These collective conscious or unconscious efforts to influence the audience’s belief in their performance, or self-presentation, are defined by Goffman as “impression management.” While Goffman’s notions of self-presentation, dramaturgy, and impression management were intended to pertain to face-to-face interaction, they are equally critical in analyzing the presentation of self and social interaction in the online environment of Facebook. Let us look at an example to explain how Goffman’s perspective applies not only to face-to-face interaction, but also to online interaction.

An important aspect of Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is the distinction between the front stage and the back stage. The “front region” is where the performance is given by the individual, whereas the “back region” refers to “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression of the performance is knowingly contradicted” (Goffman 112). This does not mean that the individual’s actions backstage are opposite his actions on the front stage, but that the individual’s role backstage is much different. Here the individual can relax, step out of his foreground role for a moment, check his appearance, and properly adjust and reimage himself (Goffman 112). In the online environment of Facebook, one’s front stage may include the capabilities of posting information about themselves on their Facebook profiles. However, Facebook users have the advanced ability to manage their profile, constantly removing certain posts, editing their information, and
revising small details within their profile. In this sense, one can inspect and edit their self-presentation before they make it widely available to others. This feature enhances the backstage ability to properly adjust and reimage oneself.

**B. Gossip Theory**

My study is derived from the pervasiveness of gossip in our everyday lives. I aim to explore how Facebook affects gossip, and how gossip affects humans. Via the transitive property, it can be assumed that Facebook affects humans. In *Discreet Indiscretions*, Bergmann asserts

“...A sociology of gossip can now use this obviousness in the everyday experience of gossip as a given that it can be converted into methodological certainty; that gossip is an easily identifiable subject of investigation that merely waits to be awakened from its slumber of the “implicitly familiar.” Thus every sociological investigation of gossip draws quite decisively from our everyday experience of gossip insofar as this creates a subject of investigation for it.” (2)

My study seeks to similarly awaken the role of gossip from its slumber.

**Arluke, Levin, and Rosnow**

One effective way to illuminate the importance of gossip in society is to examine the various reasons people gossip. Two helpful works, Arluke and Levin’s *Gossip: The inside scoop* and Rosnow’s chapter in *Behaving Badly* by Kowalski called “Rumor and Gossip in Interpersonal Interaction and Beyond,” discuss in detail several utilities of gossip, including news-bearing or information-sharing, harming another person, putting oneself “in the
know” in the eye’s of another, increasing solidarity amongst people, and socialization of society (Arluke and Levin 14-34, Kowalski 218-222).

My study will reinforce some of the already known reasons for gossip in society. Examining both self-serving and group-serving gossip, my study will examine the issue from a symbolic interactionist viewpoint. I will now explain several of gossip’s utilities and outline what each utility reveals about human nature. My analysis will open one’s eyes to the real reasons why people are compelled to gossip and how it affects society.

One of the most obvious and fundamental characteristics of gossip is its informational, or news-bearing, function. According to Rosnow, “gossip can be as opulent a source of knowledge about the community as any information, because its structure and content are responsive to local tensions” (Kowalski 220). In this sense, gossip is simply a means to collect and disseminate crucial information. Rosnow asserts that humans are information-seeking beings (Kowalski 220), so it comes as no surprise that they gossip in order to gather and spread information.

Arluke and Levin assert that an important self-serving function of gossip is to put oneself “in the know” in another’s eyes (14). If an individual’s motivation to gossip is at least partially due to the desire to be accepted by others for having the “inside scoop” on current events, this information reveals two specific facts about human nature: (1) people seek to impress their peers, and (2) people respect those who have the “inside scoop.”
Another possible self-serving motive to gossip is to harm someone else (Arluke and Levin 21). Spreading unfavorable gossip about one’s opponents indicates that people are competitive and want to get ahead. They are willing to damage another’s reputation in order to be perceived as superior. This suggests that people often engage in malicious, dubious behavior sparked by vindictive intentions.

When discussing the psychology of gossip, Ralph Rosnow says the following: “There must be a level of amiable familiarity between participants, or a desire to establish such a level, which is directed toward promoting social interaction. Conversational gossip rarely occurs among strangers...” (Kowalski 222). Based on Rosnow’s claim, another motive for gossiping is to establish and maintain feelings of intimacy with one’s peers. Rosnow goes on to suggest that people share secrets about themselves, leading to more intimate exchanges of secrets until the individuals share a mutual commitment to one another. These exchanges, says Rosnow, signal to both parties that they share a certain level of trust and share similar interests (Kowalski 221). If, through my findings, I discover this assertion to be a reality, it suggests that humans are relational beings, and people will try to connect with others by any means possible (even at the expense of another’s reputation).

These functions of gossip and what they reveal about human nature might not be considered “profound thoughts” that one could not come up with
on their own. However, one might not typically think of gossip as a reflection of human nature, and my study highlights this reflection.

One group-serving reason to gossip is much less obvious than those aforementioned. Gossip has a “moral as well as normative orientation, which may serve as an effective mechanism of socialization and social control” (Kowalski 221). For example, Jack might privately converse with someone about Susan’s inappropriate outfit she wore at a meeting. On the surface, this discussion may seem like a trivial bit of gossip, serving no inherent function but to harm Susan’s reputation. Upon deeper inspection, however, it is plausible to assign a socializing function to gossip: Jack’s comment about Susan’s outfit serves as a method to tell others what is and is not appropriate for certain occasions. Also, if Susan feels alienated for being the topic of gossip, she will be less likely to wear a similar outfit on such an occasion in the future. In this sense, gossip has a socializing nature.

**Social Comparison Theory**

I also argue that my study reinforces the social comparison theory regarding gossip, which maintains that “gossiping allows its participants to obtain needed comparisons of information in an ostensibly indirect and painless way” (Kowalski 218). Arluke and Levin further explain this theory, asserting:

“Gossip about those who are considered ‘immoral’ or ‘inferior’ serves to enhance our own feelings of respectability and self-worth. By comparison with their illegal, illicit, immoral activities, we can feel some satisfaction with ourselves. This
relative notion of self-worth and personal morality is a vulturial variable, being especially associated with competitive Western societies...Feelings of respectability are dependent on downgrading the moral character of others. There is a zero-sum definition of the situation, in which the identification of immorality is essential for the maintenance of self-worth.” (34).

If this hypothesis holds true, it reveals something significant about the human thought process. Humans get satisfaction from feeling superior to others because it reinforces their own self-worth. This phenomenon discloses that humans are competitive and judgmental beings that want to reaffirm their own dignity; gossip functions to carry out this reaffirmation.

**Bergmann**

Bergmann’s most important contribution to the topic of gossip is his discussion of gossip as a form of discreet indiscretion. He asserts that anyone who has information that pertains to the personal affairs of a friend is on the one hand obligated to discretion toward that friend while simultaneously obligated by loyalty to his other friends, which means to withhold valuable, interesting information from them. If the gossip producer divulges the gossip he necessarily commits an act of indiscretion, but when he refuses to spread the gossip indiscriminately but instead passes it intentionally to a few close friends, he behaves considerately and discreetly. Gossip, then, “is the social form of discreet indiscretion...gossip violates the precept of discretion and respects it at the same time” (Bergmann 151). Gossip as a form of discreet indiscretion is an integral issue when studying the gossip trends.
Another central assertion Bergmann makes is that gossip is a clique phenomenon, meaning that gossip is a privilege extended only to a select group of persons who mutually recognize themselves as belonging to this social network of gossip. This is related to Rosnow’s claim that gossip only occurs amongst close companions. Bergmann explicitly states, “The fact that one gossips with others is thereby—sociologically considered—almost as important as the fact that one gossips about them...no gossip, no companionship.” (Bergmann 70). He goes on to explain that gossip is not relayed arbitrarily, but in a specific order. He concludes that there is a “rank order of notification,” a “correct sequence,” of gossip. The dissemination of a piece of gossip, Bergmann decides, is guided by social selection and relational processes (46-48). This hierarchy of gossip-receivers is an important characteristic of gossip. Bergmann’s above assertions were confirmed by my interview subjects, whose responses I will explore more in-depth in the data analysis.

*Dunbar*

One of the most interesting theories regarding gossip comes from Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist and evolutionary biologist specializing in primate behavior. He suggests that gossip is an instrument of social order and group cohesion, much like the physical grooming that monkeys use to enhance social relationships. Dunbar claims that, for apes,
there is more to grooming than simple hygiene; to them, it is an expression of loyalty and friendship (21).

Prior to the development of language, humans were only capable of maintaining a social network of approximately fifty other people, because this allowed for the maximum amount of time grooming while still leaving time for other necessary activities like sleeping and feeding (Dunbar 77). Dubar asserts that humans developed language as a means to increase their social network. Due to the development of language, human societies are capable of maintaining a social network of about 150 people. Monkeys and apes must obtain information about their peers through direct observation. Language, however, allows people to exchange information over a wider network than is possible for monkeys. “In a nutshell,” says Dunbar, “I am suggesting that language evolved to allow us to gossip” (79).

This theory provides valuable insight into the study of gossip, because it relies on scientific evidence to describe a sociological phenomenon. According to Dunbar’s theory, language developed as a means to exercise a new, evolved form of social grooming—gossip—in order to extend the social network. The introduction and widespread use of social networking sites will perhaps extend this network even further.

**Elaboration on Dunbar’s Work**

Keeping Dunbar’s theory in mind, Michael Rogers comments in his article “How Social Can We Get?” on the possible influence of social
networking sites. He questions whether internet-based social networking is evidence of humans once again evolving to increase the size of their social network. He suggests that social networking sites might possibly “change the way we operate as social creatures.” This notion begins a riveting topic of conversation regarding the role of new technology in human evolution.

Where is technology taking us? Is it moving humans forward or pulling them back? Rogers believes that new technology may provide a means to once again increase our social networks.

In response to these suspicions, Robin Dunbar embarked on a new study in early 2010 to determine whether the “Facebook effect” is indeed increasing people’s social networks. Dubar’s preliminary data suggests that social networking websites like Facebook do not increase an individual’s number of meaningful friendships; the limit is still 150. However, Dunbar’s conclusion does not insist that social networking websites do not increase a person’s social network. Instead, Dunbar admitted that these sites “can enlarge the number of casual relationships a single person can maintain,” which can be considered an increased social network (Kim).

Zeynep Tufekci also studied Facebook’s effect on social networks, likening “keeping in touch” with friends and acquaintances to a form of social grooming. An important conclusion Tufekci draws is that, while non-users of social networking sites report similar numbers of close friends compared with users of social networking sites, the number of friends kept in touch with was
significantly higher among users of social networking sites. This study, in combination with my interview responses which confirmed this phenomenon, leads me to conclude that social networking websites such as Facebook increase a person’s social network.

Tufekci’s study also ties grooming, Goffman’s principles of self-presentation, and social interaction to social networking sites. His conclusion is that through social interaction, which ranges from face-to-face discussion to Facebook wall posts to Myspace pictures, individuals promote and maintain their status and construct their identity. Tufekci describes the role of social networking sites in social interaction, claiming that social networking sites “replicate many of the functions of gossip or social grooming” by allowing users to maintain a list of friends, leave public and private messages for each other, and present a public self for their community. The activity on social networking sites, says Tufekci, can be conceptualized as a form of presentation of the self, in the sense of Goffman. Users engage in impression management by adjusting their profiles, linking to their friends, displaying their likes and dislikes, joining groups, and otherwise adjusting the situated appearance of their profiles. This assertion contains valuable insight into the role social networking sites play in people’s lives from a sociological standpoint. In particular, it discusses how the various functions in a social networking site relate to impression management and the notion of self.
C. Social Literature Regarding Facebook

**Boyd**

Social networking sites indeed provide a way for individuals to present the self, but it is important to realize that the environment in which they do so is not necessarily the same as the real world environment. Danah Boyd notes that while social networking website users are able to express themselves online and locate themselves culturally, “the architecture of social network sites is fundamentally different than the architecture of unmediated social spaces.” In her analysis Boyd emphasizes that, while individuals can express themselves as part of the online community, the community is not fundamentally equivalent to the traditional environment with which we are familiar. It is important to recognize the differences in these two settings when applying sociological theory to such a new area of focus—online communities.

**Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley**

Several critics of social networking sites are concerned that these sites are reducing face-to-face interaction and digitizing friendships, or, in other words, causing people to spend more time interacting online than in person. However, Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley refute this assertion, arguing that Facebook is important for keeping in touch with old friends. They assert that “a complex picture is emerging whereby many students are not simply transferring offline relationships to an online mode, or moving from online to
offline relationships; rather many students are doing both simultaneously” (144). This simultaneity is significant because the online and offline worlds are apparently coexisting, but used in different ways for developing and sustaining various types of relationships. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley use the example of face-to-face friendships from home being sustained through continued online interactions, while newer online relationships in colleges have developed into face-to-face in-depth relationships. This reiterative use of the virtual and place-based worlds, they affirm, is “important in providing a flexible multi-modal approach for young people traversing their new lives and identities as students” (Madge, Meed, Wellens, and Hooley 144)

This is an important distinction to make, because it highlights the changes that the current generation of college students is undertaking. These students are connecting with more people than students in past generations, and have the ability to keep in closer touch with people across far distances. While much of this interaction is electronic via cell phones and social networking sites, students are nonetheless interacting. This far-reaching interaction facilitates the flow of gossip across far distances as well.

Betts

Other critics of social networking sites have cautioned that users’ personal lives are becoming overly public. Hannah Betts, for example, asserts that, due to social networking websites like Facebook, this generation
has lost its sense of boundary between private and public. In the past, says Betts, people would confide their intimate life details to one or two close friends, but “today’s mornings-after will be posted to hundreds, perhaps thousands of ‘friends.’” This shift from private to public matters is a crucial phenomenon in the era of new technology. College students post personal information on their Facebook pages, and the news spreads quickly to hundreds or thousands of other people. Even worse, an individual can post a picture of one of their ‘friends’ without that friend’s permission. Too often, an unfavorable picture can remain on the person’s profile for a long time until the person notices it and detags it. This publication of personal information facilitates the flow of gossip around college campuses.

**Gossip Sites**

Although my study focuses primarily on gossip as influenced by social networking sites, it would be negligent to ignore the emergence of anonymous gossip sites such as JuicyCampus, CollegeGossip, and CollegeACB, which aided the trend of making private matters publicized. Anonymous gossip sites were first introduced in 2007 with JuicyCampus, and other sites soon got on board. Sophia Yan of Time magazine stated:

“What used to be whispered on campuses is now broadcast, in the most cowardly way, for anyone with an Internet connection to see. Beverly Low, dean of first-year students at Colgate University, describes the phenomenon as an "electronic bathroom wall." The posts — which are often suffused with racism, sexism and homophobia — can be so vicious and juvenile that Ben Lieber, dean of students at Amherst College, likens them to "the worst of junior high.""
Throughout the article, Yan emphasizes the widespread use and broad scope of the gossip sites, noting that hundreds of schools are listed on the gossip sites and the sites receive hundreds of thousands of hits daily. Laurel Rosenhall of the Sacramento Bee differentiates these gossips sites from other social networking sites. Unlike Facebook, she says, these gossip sites are anonymous and easily-accessible to all. The gossip sites have no limited profiles or blocking options like Facebook has. According to the article, CampusGossip.com’s motto is, “Go ahead, tell it like it is – always 100% anonymous.”

Due to their protection of anonymity, gossip sites can be more dangerous than social networking sites like Facebook. As discussed earlier, private matters have become highly publicized as a result of social networking sites, but gossip sites have taken this shift to a new level. My study does not cover the role of gossip sites in college students’ interaction, but an in-depth exploration of this topic could potentially reveal more about this generation of college students.
III. METHODOLOGY

My goal for this study was to determine Facebook’s effect on gossip on college campuses. In order to accomplish this goal, I decided to first conduct a survey of a sample of Boston College undergraduates. Next, I conducted a series of face-to-face in-depth interviews to expand on the information I gathered from the survey responses. I combined the survey and interview data with my own personal experience to draw conclusions regarding Facebook’s affect on gossip.

**Surveys**

It is important to note that “the survey method when used analytically may fulfill only one of the characteristics of scientific knowledge, the establishment of empirical relationships at determined and useful levels” (Willer 4). The goal of the survey method as a whole is “the establishment of population parameters and relationships between population parameters” (Willer 5). But the relationships in every survey are limited to the particular population tested. Therefore, this process will be less emphasized than the interviews; it will serve to provide preliminary information that will guide the interview process.

I conducted my survey using SurveyMonkey.com, an American company that allows users to create web-based surveys. According to its website, SurveyMonkey.com is the world’s leading provider of web-based surveys, allowing users to create online surveys to obtain customer insights,
gather employee feedback, and conduct academic research, among other things. My primary reason for using online surveys rather than paper surveys was because online surveys make it easy for the researcher to distribute and collect data. In general, online surveys offer quicker distribution and data collection than paper interviews. My second reason for choosing online surveys over paper interviews is because they are paperless, and thus environmentally conscious.

I decided specifically on SurveyMonkey.com as my online survey generator because of its popularity among college student research. Most of the surveys that I have filled out as an undergraduate have been through SurveyMonkey.com, and I know from experience that it is very user-friendly. Researchers can easily create a survey and distribute it using a URL address, and then subjects can quickly and straightforwardly complete the survey. SurveyMonkey.com instantly formulates the results of the data and displays the data in simple graphs, allowing the researcher to easily collect and analyze the results. Through SurveyMonkey.com, I easily created a ten-question survey composed of multiple choice and short answer questions.

When surveying undergraduates, I wanted to reach a representative sample of the Boston College student population. To obtain such a sample, I created a Facebook event and invited 350 Boston College students (all of my Boston College Facebook friends) to participate in the survey, providing a link to the survey URL in the event invitation. From the link, students were
able to fill in their answers and submit them online. The response rate was relatively high, as 142 students filled out the survey.

I think that gender is an important distinction in my study; therefore, I wanted to ensure that I was getting a representative stratified sample. To gather this information, the first question on my survey inquired the gender of the respondent. This way I was able to ensure I was getting a good portion of male and female respondents. I also wanted to stratify the population by graduation year, because age is an important consideration as well. To gather this information, the second question on my survey inquired the graduation year of the respondent, allowing me to ensure I received responses from freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. While there were not an equal number of males and females or freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, each group had substantial participation rates, so my study will not be skewed based on gender or age.

As with any method, my survey method contains various limitations. One limitation is the fact that I distributed the survey via Facebook, meaning that every respondent had a Facebook account. I do not consider this a weakness to my study, however, because I want to discover how Facebook affects gossip, so targeting Facebook users makes sense; non-Facebookers would only skew my survey results. A more significant limitation, however, is that I chose to distribute the survey to 350 of my Facebook friends, and, while I would say that I am Facebook friends with a very diverse group of
Boston College students, my Facebook friends might not be completely representative of the 9,000 Boston College undergraduate students.

Another limitation is self-selection; the respondents of my survey may have had a particular interest in the topic of the survey, Facebook and gossip, which could skew the results. Furthermore, my sample contained only Boston College students. With more time and money, I would expand my research to include other universities. Boston College might not necessarily be representative of all colleges, because it is a private school, it is over-representatively white, and it has a Jesuit affiliation. Expanding my research to other universities would make my study more representative of college campuses, as I would include large state schools, small liberal arts colleges, and demographically diverse public and private universities. Much more time and money would be needed for the distribution of surveys and the transportation to different colleges across the country to conduct interviews.

If I had more time to conduct my study, I would significantly increase the sample size of my population to be surveyed. With more time and resources, I could afford to increase the sample size from 142 to 500 or more undergraduate students. With this increased sample, it would take significantly more time to locate and get permission from subjects, distribute the surveys, and tally and analyze the data.

Increasing the sample size of my survey population would be advantageous because, in general, a larger sample size makes the study more
legitimate. I do not anticipate that my study will contain flaws due to a limited sample size of undergraduates, however, because I was careful to get a representative sample of the Boston College student population based on gender and age.

**Interviews**

Willer asserts that “if the aim of the researcher is the systematic study of revolutions, of work groups... or of any such phenomena, and if the aim is to uncover scientific knowledge about these phenomena, then he should not attempt to reach his goal by means of the survey alone” (5). For this reason, the most important method in my study is in-depth interviews. This process is inductive and was used to obtain first-hand accounts of gossip in college.

In order to obtain subjects for interview, I sent a Facebook message to the same sample I sent my survey. In the message, I thanked them for their participation in survey, and informed them that I was seeking volunteers to interview. I requested that if they were willing to interview to please email me regarding their intentions to volunteer. To view the message in its entirety, refer to Appendix D.

From the volunteers, I wanted to obtain a proportionate number of males, females, freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors that responded to my survey. For example, my survey results yielded 63% female and 37% male responses, so my interview sample contained 66% female and 33% male subjects, respectively. The survey and interview breakdowns were similarly
parallel. Essentially I tried to keep the survey and interview respondents as consistent as possible in terms of age and gender. Demographic breakdowns by age and gender can be viewed in Appendixes B and C.

My study focuses on two key concepts: gossip and Facebook. I have conducted several interviews to reach a fundamental understanding of how these two concepts affect other concepts, such as social interaction, self-presentation, and impression management, among others.

In order to effectively convey certain questions to my subjects, I must supply operational definitions of the various concepts that I seek to measure. First and foremost, I must operationally define the most important idea in my study, gossip. As mentioned in the introduction, I define gossip as “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting” who may or may not be present, typically containing an undertone of secrecy or privacy. This communication can have a positive, negative, or neutral message about the target of gossip. The gossip can be about oneself; people often gossip to others about their personal issues. With this definition, letters, emails, social network posts, and text messages can qualify as gossip.

In an attempt to tap this operational definition of gossip, I began with indirect interview questions to sensitize the subjects, such as “Describe your relationship with Facebook (how long have you had a Facebook? How often do you log on? In what ways do you use Facebook?)” and “When you are talking
with your friends and acquaintances, what kinds of things do you talk about? Do you bring up mutual friends? What do you say about them? Do you consider the topic of these conversations to be public or private information?”

These questions often indirectly led the interviewee into divulging valuable information about their gossip patterns. I also asked more direct questions, such as “In what ways do you feel you can control your image on Facebook?” and “When you are browsing through your ‘friends’ Facebook profiles, what are you looking for?” I typically began the interviews with more indirect questions before asking the more direct questions. The answers to these questions led to a better understanding of technology’s impact on gossip, giving me valuable insight on why college students gossip and how they gossip. More importantly, their answers led me to the intertwining concepts of gossip, social interaction, self-presentation, and impression management.

There are several advantages of in-depth interviews for the purposes of this study. I feel that the interviews yield rich, detailed, insightful data. Furthermore, interviews allow the researcher to explore topics in depth; I prodded the interviewees for deeper insight on the topics and issues discussed in the survey responses. I feel that the face-to-face contact provides a comfortable environment where the interviewee willingly divulges truthful information.
Some critics of this method have suggested that I conduct these interviews non-synchronously online to avoid interview bias and to ensure that I have a written record of responses. However, non-synchronous online interviews would require an enthusiastic, honest effort on behalf of the interviewee, an effort that I cannot expect the majority of college students to be capable of giving without the discipline of an interviewer present. Additionally, I asked and received permission to tape record the interviews so that I had a physical record of the entire discussion. Afterwards, I printed summaries of the interviews and coded them to examine core ideas and reoccurring trends in the responses. Hopefully this strategy eliminated or greatly reduced the tendency to embellish or misrepresent responses.

I conducted six in-depth interviews, and from the beginning I expected to gather a significant portion of my most valuable data from these in-depth interviews. Even with a small interview pool of six students, I was able to gather sufficient quality information. I believe that this information sufficed for a proper analysis of Facebook’s effect on gossip trends on college campuses.

I combined the information gathered from the in-depth interviews and surveys with my own personal field research on the subject, which was determined by my experiences with how technology has affected gossip. At first I struggled with the idea of “studying” my friends and acquaintances, constantly noting their actions and behavior. I felt that it was a violation of
trust, because they have not granted permission to be studied. However, after reconsideration, this sort of field research is nothing more than my own human experience.

Human experience is a crucial element of my study, and I hoped to gather insight on human experience through my interviews and my field research. In some ways, my methods are unreliable in that it would be difficult to replicate the findings in a different sample of undergraduates. My study’s strength, however, is the narrative of individual experience.
IV. ANALYSIS

After careful review of the existing literature on gossip and social interaction, I surveyed a representative sample of 142 Boston College undergraduate students. The survey questions and results can be viewed in Appendix A. Following the analysis of the survey results, I interviewed a corresponding sample of six Boston College undergraduate students to gather further insight on how Facebook affects college students, particularly in terms of gossip, communication, and self-presentation. I use the code names Connor, Rooney, Courtney, Melanie, Sarah, and Whitney when referencing my interview subjects in this paper for identification purposes. In no way do these code names reflect the actual names of the interview participants.

Combined with my research on literature and existing studies, the results of the surveys and interviews shed light on how Facebook affects social interaction, the presentation of self, and gossip. My general conclusion is that the pervasiveness of Facebook coupled with the simplicity of posting information about oneself and others on Facebook creates a shift from private to public; what were once considered private matters are now broadcasted on a public forum to an extremely large audience. Consequently, it is easier for members of society to participate in gossip.

Pervasiveness of Facebook

As mentioned in my introduction, Facebook is the second most-trafficked site in the world, with more than 85% of all college students having
accounts. More interesting than this statistic, however, is the frequency with which students use this social networking website. From my survey, I found that 100% of my respondents use Facebook on a daily basis, with 93% of the respondents logging onto Facebook more than once per day. My interviewees were no exception; Whitney stated that she is logged onto Facebook whenever she is using her computer, Melanie admitted to browsing Facebook for more than two hours each day, and Rooney explained that Facebook is synced to his phone so that he is constantly getting updates without needing to use his computer. This rampant use of Facebook can be explained by users’ desires to present themselves to others in an online community and take advantage of the newest forum for gossip dissemination.

**Self-Presentation**

Users are able to modify their Facebook profiles in a way that portrays their life and personality to others. This portrayal is the essence of self-presentation. Users are able to post pictures of themselves and their friends, add comments to these pictures, friend request certain people, create status updates indicating their mood or whereabouts, and post comments on others’ walls. All of these actions are a form of self-presentation on Facebook. They each relate to the persona one creates online. Interestingly, 62% of my survey respondents claimed that they control their Facebook image by editing information displayed on their Facebook page, while only 12% indicated that they could not control their Facebook image (the remaining respondents said
that they were unsure). This finding suggests that people have the ability to self-present on Facebook.

In my earlier discussion of self-presentation, I noted Goffman’s assertion that when an individual appears before others, he has reason to act a certain way in order to convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey (4). In many ways, the ability to convey an impression to others is even easier on Facebook than in face-to-face interaction due to differences in reaction time. In real life, one must act on his feet quickly, paying attention to verbal comments, facial expressions, and body language immediately during social interaction. On Facebook, however, individuals have more time to act. Connor stated that anyone can easily manage their appearance on Facebook, because users can selectively upload pictures, carefully make statements in their “About me” section, and create status updates that portray a certain image of themselves to others. He added, “I block pictures from everyone, except my default pictures, allowing me to choose what pictures people see of me.”

Impression management is similar to face-to-face interaction, however, because users cannot control what others post about them. Whitney explains, “You control what you say about yourself, but you can’t control what other people say about you. You can control what you look like by tagging pictures, but you can’t control what pictures people tag you in. It’s similar to
real life.” Her explanation highlights the similarities between Facebook and face-to-face interaction.

Goffman goes on to say that if an individual is trying to express a certain image, he must forego or conceal action inconsistent with these standards. Rooney articulates this impression management on Facebook, asserting the following:

“You can control how you want others to perceive you by monitoring what photos you have or by updating statuses to let people know what you are doing... For instance, if I wanted everyone to know I’m pre-med, I would have all my Facebook info and status updates about doing work and studying and doing pre-med stuff, whereas if I wanted people to think I’m a party animal, I’d have all pictures of me partying, having status updates like “hungover STILL.” In this sense, my Facebook doesn’t truly depict who I am, it depicts how I want people to perceive me. I’m not going to have statuses of me being upset, or of pictures of me being sloppy or black[ed] out drunk, because I don’t want people thinking, well, knowing that I am a sloppy depressed shitshow. On Facebook you can monitor your emotions or how you seem. If you have all pictures of yourself at volunteer events, someone viewing your pictures would think, “Oh my god this kid never stops volunteering.” Self-presentation on Facebook is easy.”

It is not always possible, however, to completely control one’s Facebook image. The primary obstacle to controlling one’s image on Facebook is the simplicity with which people can post information about their Facebook friends. This complication, as we will see, can lead to gossip dissemination.

**Complications of Self-Presentation on Facebook: Losing Face**

Due to the nature of Facebook, people are able to post text or photos of a Facebook friend without this friend’s permission. Inevitably, information is
posted on users’ profiles that they do not want posted. This information will remain on the user’s profile until he removes it. Often times, the posted information goes unnoticed by the user for hours or even days. All it takes is minutes, sometimes seconds, for hundreds of the user’s friends to notice the posted material. When such a scenario occurs, the user loses face, and must correct the mishap by detagging an unfavorable picture or deleting an unwanted post.

In my survey, I discovered that 43% of all respondents have posted information about a third party on their Facebook page of which the third party might not necessarily approve. More revealing is that 90% of all respondents indicated that they have detagged a picture of themselves because the picture displayed an inappropriate or otherwise unfavorable image of themselves. Evidently, then, Facebook users post information about other individuals with the knowledge, or at least suspicion, that the other user will not approve. After this discovery in my survey, I wanted to discover (1) why people were uncomfortable with certain posts, or why they felt the need to delete posts, and (2) if people constantly detag unfavorable pictures and delete inappropriate wall posts, why people post them in the first place. The next two sections will answer these two questions.

**Why People Delete Posted Material**

The problem with self-presentation on Facebook is the variety of people who have access to one’s Facebook profile. In life, it is evident that
individuals attempt to convey a certain image to one group of people but a completely different image to another group. For example, an individual may wish to portray an outgoing, social, party-hardy personality to their friends and peers, but a professional, academic personality to potential employers. A study by CareerBuilder reveals that 53% of employers research potential job candidates on social networking websites such as Facebook, and 40% of employers said they found information on a social network that dissuaded them from hiring a certain candidate (Skinner). Connor, Melanie, Sarah, and Courtney each expressed concern with this issue, stating that they are cautious when deciding whether to accept someone as a Facebook friend, because their Facebook profiles may be perceived as unprofessional or immature by potential employers.

According to Goffman, when an individual plays a part, he implicitly asks his audience to believe the impression that he is trying to give (18). A “sincere” individual is one who is taken in by his own act and believes that the impression he is trying to convey is reality. A “cynical” individual, on the other hand, is one who has no belief in his own act (Goffman 18). Goffman introduces the idea of audience segregation: “by audience segregation the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (49). This is why people choose to have limited-access Facebook profiles for their parents, teachers, and employers. They do not accept
certain people as Facebook friends because they do not want them to see what happens in another facet of their lives. The role of the ambitious, academic student, for example, does not mix well with the pictures from last weekend’s keg party. Melanie stated, “I make my profile private as much as I can, and I detag pictures with heavy alcohol consumption, like photos of me doing a keg stand. I block certain people, like my coach and my mom, from seeing certain things on my profile.” In short, people delete posted material in order to maintain the image they wish to convey to several different audiences. This process is a difficult one on Facebook, because users only have one profile, not a separate profile for each of their audiences. So in order to maintain a certain image to these different audiences, users must conceal information that is inconsistent with these images.

Why People Post Unfavorable Information about Others

Before delving into the question of why people post inappropriate, scandalous, or otherwise unfavorable information about others on Facebook, it is important to remember that people post things on Facebook in order to present themselves. By posting information, users are under the assumption that others are viewing this posted information. I asked each interviewee what they were looking for when they were browsing through their friends’ Facebook profiles. My interviewees indicated that, as Facebook users, they view others’ posted information in order to retrieve the latest gossip. Melanie, for example, offered the following:
“I look to see what they did over the weekend, I see if they’re in a relationship, or if any gossip is written on someone’s wall. If someone has a funny quote or memory from a night, I will assume things based on the post. If it’s gossip, I want to know about it, and I want to tell my friends. Like if someone got in trouble and their status indicates that, I want to know. Or, for example, when the [Boston College] housing lottery took place, a lot of people had, “I hate [the Office of Residential Life]” as their status; this indicates they didn’t get a good lottery pick, and I want to know that kind of info. Then I’d tell my friends about it.”

Individuals browse through Facebook profiles in order to get the latest gossip about others. This is gossip’s news-bearing function.

At first glance, understanding why people post inappropriate, scandalous, or otherwise unfavorable information about someone on Facebook is simple. People post unfavorable things about others because it is a fun and exciting way of spreading gossip. Whitney shed light on the issue, offering the following insight:

“Stories about people that are interesting and scandalous get spread easily because people like to hear about it. It’s sad, but people like to hear bad stories about others. It’s like how the most depressing stories are on the news. Bad news is just more interesting than good news. Bad news is gossip-worthy.”

Whitney told the bold reality that people like knowing the news about other people, especially bad news. People post the information because others seek it out and enjoy hearing about it.

As previously discussed in the Theory section, an important self-serving reason for gossiping is to put oneself “in the know” in another’s eyes: people want to be seen as having the “inside scoop.” I was fascinated to learn
that this is even true on Facebook, which is a crucial motive for posting unfavorable information about others. Sarah emphasized this point, stating that

“That’s what it’s all about.”

Others verified this motive. Melanie even claimed that she gives credit to people who post scandalous, gossip-worthy pictures of others. She said, “We had a semi formal party and two of my friends, Nick and Katherine, had pictures that I thought were scandalous and hilarious, and I thought Nick and Katherine were funny for posting them.” Melanie later added, “I think people want that reaction, where people wonder how they got the photo.”

Rooney also verified that people post information in order to receive a reaction. He added this insight:

“I post pictures wanting a reaction...I like when people comment on my pictures saying it’s funny. For example, I posted a picture of a girl who passed out and peed herself at a party. I didn’t particularly like her, and I knew my friends at school would think it was funny, so I posted it. Also, this girl is a joke and I wanted to let her know that she should get a hold of her life. When she saw the picture, I think she got the message.”

Rooney clarifies that he posted the picture in hopes that others would appreciate his humor and credit him for it. This response also confirms one of the group-serving functions of gossip, to act as an effective mechanism of
socialization and social control. By posting the picture, Rooney hoped to notify this girl that she needs to tone down her partying and show dignity.

**Social Network**

In order to fully grasp the impact of Facebook on gossip and communication on college campuses, I wanted to determine whether Facebook effectively allows people to gossip more often or if it merely changes the mode of gossip. The conclusion was that, because Facebook increases a person’s social network, it facilitates the flow of gossip and changes the mode in which gossip is exchanged, thus increasing the amount that people gossip.

As discussed earlier, Robin Dunbar asserted that humans developed language in order to increase their social network. Apes, for example, can maintain a social network of approximately 50 apes. With the evolution of language, humans could engage in social grooming in the form of gossip, effectively increasing their social network to about 150 people (Dunbar 77-79).

Michael Rogers suspected that social networking websites could act as an “evolutionary shift” that changes the way humans operate as social beings. Zeynep Tufekci’s study confirmed Rogers’ suspicion, concluding that users of social networking sites keep in touch with more people than those who do not use social networking sites. Based on Tufekci’s study, in junction with the responses from my in-depth interviews, I conclude that Facebook has effectively increased the typical college student’s social network, allowing
him to stay in touch with a larger number of people across farther distances than was possible prior to social networking websites. One of my interviewees, Conner, shed valuable light on the issue:

“I guess [Facebook] is a way to catch up and keep in touch with people without actually talking with them face-to-face or on the phone. If I didn’t have Facebook, these people might fall out of my social circle. In a way, I am keeping tabs on them ...Facebook connects you to your friends from home by the fact that you know what’s going on in their lives even though you haven’t spoken to them. It opens up a different, easier form of communication.”

This assertion was verified by other interviewees. Courtney claimed that “by allowing me to view wall-to-wall conversations between people and their friends, view status updates, and browse pictures, Facebook increases my social network.” Whitney agreed, claiming that Facebook increases social network by providing “a quick way to say hi to people” and “an easy way to maintain friendships that you might otherwise fall out of.”

The interview responses clearly indicated that Facebook increases one’s social network, and further evidence suggests that Facebook thus increases the amount of gossip in one’s life. Whitney’s response was indicative of this phenomenon:

“I have to say that I gossip more because of Facebook. [Facebook] makes things more public, more open, which provides a source of gossip. It also allows people to communicate this gossip quickly and easily with a simple click.”
The other interviewees were similarly convinced that Facebook increases the amount people gossip, and were consistent in their opinion that Facebook can facilitate the gossip process.

**The Increasingly Publicized Self**

Critics of social networking sites have cautioned that users’ personal lives are becoming overly public. One such critic, Hannah Betts, asserts the following:

“For there is now a generation of 20 and 30-year-olds who have become so used to living what might once have constituted their private lives in public—thanks to Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and the like—that they have lost any sense of the boundary between public and private... Everyone, it seems, is at it. Where one might once have confided one's amorous intrigues in one or two intimates, so today's mornings-after will be posted to hundreds, perhaps thousands of “friends.””

This shift from private to public matters is a crucial phenomenon in the era of new technology. By allowing users to broadcast private matters about themselves and others to a large audience, social networking websites effectively transform gossip. Facebook at once creates a forum to broadcast private issues and a means to disseminate this information. This shift from private to public is not specific, however, to Facebook. Other technological advances have eroded privacy, causing personal lives to enter into the public sphere. For example, first there was email, which, while many considered these messages to be private, could be easily forwarded to other email addresses or printed for public circulation. Then cell phones featured cameras, which could capture pictures of people without them noticing. A
famous example of this occurrence is the image circulating the World Wide Web featuring world-class swimmer Michael Phelps using marijuana-smoking paraphernalia, which was captured by a camera phone and submitted to an international news source. While this can be considered a private act, it was publicized to a large audience due to a technological advancement. This publication had large implications, including a three month suspension from swim competition and dropped endorsements from Kellog, according to a People magazine online article by Mike Fleeman.

These examples highlight some of the technological advancements that have led to the erosion of privacy. Now, college students post personal information on their Facebook pages, and the news spreads quickly to hundreds, sometimes thousands of other people. It begs the question, why do so many college students today feel the need to broadcast the details of their private lives on such a public forum? Courtney suggested that this publicized self is a generational shift caused at least partially by Facebook:

“I think the definition of what should and shouldn’t remain private has changed. If people prior to Facebook saw the kinds of things that people post on Facebook, they’d think it was weird or inappropriate to post such private pictures and info. As Facebook became more popular and commonplace, posting pictures and other private matters wasn’t as big of a deal...You don’t really think about the fact that all 900 of your friends can see your wall posts, photos, etc. You’re really intending it for your friends eyes. But people just got more used to publicized information.”

The interviewees agreed that private matters are willingly posted on people’s Facebook pages. Even worse, an individual can post a picture of one of their
‘friends’ without that friend’s permission. Too often, an unfavorable picture can remain on the person’s profile for a long time until the person notices it and detags it.

An interesting way to examine Facebook’s tendency to publicize private information about the self is through inquiry about “Facebook stalking” practices. An overwhelming majority (89%) of those surveyed admitted to participation in some form of what they would consider Facebook stalking. The issue of Facebook stalking came up several times in each of the interviews, and I asked each interviewee to define the Facebook stalking practice. The respondents agreed that, while the specifics of the definition may differ from person to person, everyone shares the same general definition of Facebook stalking. Taken from responses from several interviews, Facebook stalking can be defined as browsing through a person’s Facebook profile, perhaps sifting through their info, tagged pictures, status updates, and wall posts, without the specific intent to comment. The interviewees each insisted that Facebook stalking is an acceptable use of Facebook. Whitney shed light on how commonplace and accepted this practice truly is:

“I know everyone [Facebook stalks]. You put the information out there knowing someone will look at it. It’s your choice. Posting the information or pictures is giving consent to be stalked...If people stalk me, I don’t feel violated. I know that if I let them be my friend, I am opening up to allow them to stalk me. I wouldn’t be super creeped out because I know I do it too.”
The respondents’ attitudes towards Facebook stalking show that college students today are relatively open about their lives, at least in the online haven of Facebook. Information is willingly publicized, making it easy to present oneself to their community and gain access to other’s information as well. As we will see, this publication of personal information facilitates the flow of gossip around college campuses.

**How It All Leads To Gossip**

I have diligently outlined how today’s generation of college students can easily post and access information about oneself and others in a highly public forum, which leads to private matters being publicized to an extremely large audience. This exposed public makes private lives easily accessible, which leads to the facilitation of gossip.

As previously discussed, many Facebook users post unfavorable information about others on Facebook because people like hearing bad things about others. The action of knowingly posting unfavorable information about others on Facebook in itself can fall under the definition of gossip because it is communicating value-laden information about others. The information, while not being passed secretly, still contains an undertone of secrecy in that the subject of gossip considers the information to be private. In fact, 34.5% of my survey respondents claimed that they had found information about themselves posted on Facebook that they considered private or did not want seen by others.
Indeed, Facebook leads to gossip by allowing users to post others’ private information online, thus broadcasting private matters publicly. The gossip does not stop there, however; in fact, 65% of my survey respondents indicated that they have verbally spoken to someone regarding scandalous information about a third party that they found posted on Facebook. This statistic suggests that, once the private information is posted online, people begin talking about it face-to-face as well as online, spreading gossip. My interviewees confirmed this occurrence. Sarah, for instance, stated that she tells her friends when she sees scandalous information about someone via Facebook: “I would text someone, and say, “Oh my God, look at this.” Or I would just show them. I just recently did that, actually. I just showed my friend a picture of one of our mutual friends whose dress was see-through.”

But gossip can spread because of Facebook even if the posted material is not considered scandalous by the subject of gossip. In his interview Rooney stated that he would show his friends or send them a personal message if he saw something that he considered to be negative or scandalous, even if the subject of gossip did not consider it so. He said, “If I see a picture of someone from my high school who got really fat, I will post a link of a photo to my friends’ Facebooks in a private message… I will also talk about something negative I saw on Facebook if that person comes up in a conversation.” When prodded further regarding why he would choose to post the picture in a private message rather than on his friends’ public walls, Rooney admitted
that he did not want everyone to know he was relaying this information to others, even though the information was publicly posted on the subject of gossip’s Facebook profile. In this sense, Rooney’s act of private messaging falls under the umbrella of gossip because his message contains an assumption of privacy or secrecy. He only wishes to relay the information to certain people. Bergmann calls this exclusivity the “clique phenomenon” of gossip.

**Gossip, a Vicious Cycle**

Once a piece of gossip is spread, a cycle begins, causing a chain of gossip. (need citation from literature). Sarah sums up this process:

> “The social atmosphere of college is more confined, and it does happen that you talk about other people....It’s addicting to tell people what others have told you. I find it difficult to keep the information to myself...You just have a psychological urge to tell people. You might feel an obligation to tell a specific friend if they have a connection to the subject of the gossip... People tell me things assuming I’m not going to tell anyone, but then I do tell people, continuing the chain of gossip. You think it doesn’t go beyond, but it does...Information just spills over. People feel obligated to tell somebody else.”

Melanie further emphasized this point, noting, “I figure that a couple people I tell gossip to will tell other people. It’s a vicious cycle like that. For some reason, everyone ends up finding out. I know it’s a possibility, if not inevitable. It’s just a matter of time before everyone knows a good piece of gossip.” This process is expedited by the internet, especially social
networking sites like Facebook which allow users to post on their friends’ walls, private message, and chat interactively.
V. CONCLUSION

The research for this study began with an overview of the existing literature surrounding gossip and the social implications of Facebook. I subsequently created a survey that would hopefully illuminate Facebook practices and social trends among college students. From the survey results, I gathered a base understanding of self-presentation on Facebook, along with several practices that enabled users to manage their presentation of self online. From here I was able to formulate interview questions that I believed would reveal the true motives of college students for certain Facebook practices, social interactions such as gossip, and attitudes. The core finding of my research is that, because it is so easy to post information about oneself and others on the all-pervasive website Facebook, private matters are being publicized to an increasingly large audience, making it easier for individuals in society to gossip.

This research truly makes everyday life clearer, because it seeks to make sense of technology’s role in our society today through a careful examination of an everyday cultural phenomenon—gossip. Furthermore, this study is relevant to the field of gossip and sociology in general because it illuminates how gossip plays a role in today’s society, and how the rampant use of new technology has affected human interaction and social behavior.

Theorists agree that technological advancements can be a major impetus for social change. French sociologist Emile Durkheim, for example,
claimed that modernization and industrialization broke down the social cohesion that existed in pre-industrial communities. However, contemporary theorists assert that certain technological advances help to bring back the cohesion lost by industrialization.

In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Emile Durkheim discusses social solidarity and the collective consciousness. Durkheim asserts that “social solidarity exists which arises because a certain number of states of consciousness are common to all members of the same society” (DOL 64). Essentially, social solidarity is stronger when a community is unified by common beliefs and shared emotional feelings. These shared beliefs create a collective consciousness; the ideas held in common are transformed into a world of their own—the world of moral norms. In a given society, the norms maintain cohesion among individual members. Close-knit communities were possible in pre-industrial societies, but due to the division of labor in post-industrial societies, social solidarity disintegrated and the cohesion was lost. Modern technologies such as social networking websites are helping to bring back this cohesion, however. In fact, Kate Fox studied this phenomenon, concluding that “a technological advance is helping to counteract the adverse effects of previous technological advances. [Social networking websites] are re-creating the more natural, humane communication patterns of pre-industrial times: we are using space-age technology to return to stone-age gossip.”
Researching the effects of social networking websites on cohesion, collective consciousness, and social solidarity would make for an interesting study. Since the onset of the internet boom in the 1990s, there have been countless studies on the repercussions of internet technologies. Especially in the recent world of social media, file sharing, and web 2.0 capabilities such as web-based communities, social networking sites, wikis, and blogs, people have begun questioning the long-term implications of such technological advances. My study helps illuminate some of these implications, albeit a small fraction.

While my study specifically examines Facebook as a technology that has changed social interaction in society, it might be helpful for future researchers to expand this study to include other popular social networking sites such as Myspace and Twitter. Myspace, Twitter, and Facebook are very different websites and thus I suspect that they have very different implications for social interaction and, specifically, gossip.

Another issue that would be interesting to explore in-depth is the repercussions of gossip sites like CollegeGossip and the former JuicyCampus. These sites have hit the college social scene more recently than social networking sites like Facebook, but have significant implications regarding social life on college campuses. Several lawsuits have been filed against such websites due to their impact on the subjects of gossip. Like Facebook, gossip sites demand consideration regarding issues such as self-presentation and
the right to privacy, but they also likely invoke the additional concern of anonymity.

If I had substantial time and resources at my disposal, I would probably alter my topic. I would explore technology’s role in gossip trends on a much broader level, widening the scope to include several other technological advances. For example, I could look back to how gossip trends were affected by the introduction of the cell phone, computer, television, radio, telephone, telegraph, and even as far back as the printing press.

This expansion in my study would allow me to examine which technological advances impacted society’s gossiping the most, and in what specific ways they changed the modes of gossip. Theorists suggest that the “rapid changes in the ways we communicate generate new questions about the nature of human interaction, alter radically the impact of time and space on talk, and blur the distinctions between private and public activities” (Bielby and Harrington). The introduction of new communicative technologies is precisely what “rapid changes” in communication these theorists are talking about. Expanding my study to include these advancements in technology would allow me to analyze how each advancement altered human interaction, particularly in terms of gossip.

Researching the change in technology’s impact on gossip trends would make for an interesting study indeed, albeit a completely different study than my current one. Studying gossip can reveal a lot about human interaction,
social solidarity, and even human nature. Researching the advancement in technology over time and its impact on gossip would hopefully reveal how human interaction and the social environment changed as a result of the new technology.

I have already outlined several limitations in my study. Given more time and resources, I would increase the sample size of my surveys and interviews and expand my research to include other colleges and universities. Despite the various limitations, however, I feel that my study adequately illuminates how technology can significantly impact social interaction. Using Boston College as a lens to examine American colleges in general, I showed how Facebook leads individuals highly publicize private matters, making it easier to disseminate gossip.
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Madge, Clare, Meek, Julia, Wellens, Jane, and Hooley, Tristram. “Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: ‘It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work.’” *Learning, Media and Technology* Vol. 34, No. 2, June 2009, 141–155.


**Survey:**


**Interviews:**


Appendix A: Social Networking Survey Results

1. I am

○ Male: 53/142 (37%)
○ Female: 89/142 (63%)

2. What year in school are you?

○ Freshman: 24/142 (12%)
○ Sophomore: 42/142 (30%)
○ Junior: 21/142 (15%)
○ Senior: 53/142 (37%)

3. Do you have a Facebook account?

○ Yes: 142/142 (100%)
○ No: 0/142 (0%)

4. On average, how often do you log on to Facebook?

○ Never: 0/142 (0)
○ Once per week: 0/142 (0)
○ Once per day: 10/142 (7%)
○ 2-10 times per day: 98/142 (69%)
○ 10-30 times per day: 27/142 (19%)
○ 30+ times per day: 6/142 (4%)

5. Which of the following activities consumes most of your time on Facebook?

○ Writing on friends' walls and / or reading your own wall posts: 50/142 (35%)
○ Browsing through friends' pictures: 66/142 (46%)
○ Using games and / or applications: 4/142 (3%)
Private messaging: 0/142 (0%)
Facebook chat: 18/142 (13%)
Reading advertisements: 0/142 (0%)
Other: 3/142 (2%)

6. (Check all that apply) Have you ever

☐ Posted information (text or photo) about a third party on your Facebook page of which the person might not necessarily approve? 61/142 (43%)
☐ Verbally spoken to someone regarding scandalous information about a third party that you found posted on Facebook (text or photo)? 93/142 (65%)
☐ Found information about yourself (text or photo) on Facebook that you considered "private" or that you did not want posted on Facebook? 49/142 (34.5%)
☐ Detagged a picture of yourself because the picture displayed an inappropriate or unfavorable image of you? 128/142 (90%)

7. Have you ever felt embarrassed or hurt by a photo or piece of text that was posted about you on Facebook?

☐ Yes: 51/142 (36%)
☐ No: 62/142 (44%)
☐ Unsure: 29/142 (20%)

8. Do you feel that you control your Facebook image by editing information displayed on your Facebook page (e.g. tagging and detagging pictures, changing profile info, deleting wall posts, etc)?

☐ No: 17/142 (12%)
☐ Unsure: 35/142 (24.6%)
☐ Yes (specify): 88/142 (62%)

8. Do you feel that you control your Facebook image by editing information displayed on your Facebook page (e.g. tagging and detagging pictures,
changing profile info, deleting wall posts, etc)? [selected responses, unedited]

- I am actually a very privacy conscious person, but sadly I use Facebook. The simple fact is, that nothing anyone does on the internet is private no matter how much to try to protect it. If someone really wanted to get information about me from Facebook, detagging or changing information, wouldn't stop.

- I have my privacy settings set so I can control as much as possible who I want to be able to see what information/photos and who I want to limit as far as access to what is on my profile. The only downfall I find with having trouble controlling my image on Facebook is through the mini-feed. The privacy settings changed in a way that I can no longer control what appears on the mini-feed, so when I write on people's walls/comment on photos, I have to be conscious of the fact that others can read what I'm saying.

- Facebook is what you sign up for. The classic expression "it is what it is" applies to my feelings. Do I control my Facebook image? Yes, with the tools Facebook provides me - i.e. detagging, privacy controls, power to delete comments, etc. It's what you signed up for...so if it is too a point where you are upset over a picture or a comment, remove your profile or remove yourself from ever being in the situations to begin with.

- Once can specify what information enters and stays on the Facebook page, allowing them to determine what they do and don't want people to see about them.

- Detag pics that I look ugly in or show me drinking etc.

9. In your opinion, how accurately does your Facebook profile (your tagged pictures, default picture, wall posts, info, videos, and applications) depict your true self?

- Not at all accurately: 2/142 (1.4%)
- A little accurately: 22/142 (15.5%)
- Somewhat accurately: 75/142 (52.8%)
- Very accurately: 43/142 (30.3%)
- Completely accurately: 0/142 (0%)
10. Do you partake in Facebook "stalking" (i.e. browsing through random friends' Facebook pages, including their pictures, wall posts, or other information)? Why or why not?

- Yes: 126/142 (89%)
- No: 16/142 (11%)

(specify)

10. Do you partake in Facebook "stalking" (i.e. browsing through random friends' Facebook pages, including their pictures, wall posts, or other information)? Why or why not? [selected responses, unedited]

- Yes, because it's an easy, judgment-free way of getting to know people/finding something out (on a public forum) without having to actually talk to them
- Yes, when I'm procrastinating. Keeps me in the loop.
- Yes - I do it because I can. If I am given the opportunity to see what X's girlfriend or boyfriend looks like...then why not? If the information is out there to take, I'm not going to self-censor myself.
- absolutely, its fun, its like gossip
- Yes i don't even mean to, but i just get caught up in it when i'm procrastinating. My roommates do it alllll the time. They literally know so much about people they barely even know.
- Yes. It's a form of entertainment. People love to peek into other people's lives and facebook lets us do that anonymously.'
- Yes, as a method of gaining information about people that I would not otherwise know.
- yes; boredom and procrastination. It seems like a way to engage in a gossip-like activity without feeling guilty because no one knows you are looking.
- ABSOLUTELY! You can see pictures from parties someone tells you about that you didn't get to go to, you can figure out who someone is ... if it's online then they shouldn't mind it being seen.
- Haha yes, because it allows me to keep in touch/know about people's lives that I wouldn't necessarily talk to on a daily basis. It also gives me something to talk about in conversation with them
- Yes, facebook is a place where people share information about themselves so that's where I am going to go for that information
- yes because that is how i stay connected to the world
- Yeah; it's hard for me to remember people's names. Facebook stalking helps me do this. I also feel like I get to know a little bit more about them through their pictures and posts. It's fun to piece stories together
based on wall-to-walls and pictures. That way you figure out what happened last night or last year without having to ask!
• only when i am trying to find out infomation about a person
• Yes, facebook is a place where people share information about themselves so that's where I am going to go for that information
• Yes, facebook stalking is amazing. It gives me something to do in my freetime and I get to stay up on everybody's lives. I love seeing pictures of people partying.
• Yes, usually when I'm bored, probably for the same reason people-watching is interesting.
• Yes, sometimes because I want to see who other people are talking about.
• Absolutely. It's a way to keep informed and up to date on social gossip. It's also a good way to keep in touch with family and friends. Also, I like to see what my close friends are up to without asking them -- I don't want them to think I care what they are doing, but I really do actually care, so I use facebook to satisfy my curiosity while seeming aloof.
Appendix B: Ethnography Demographic Breakdowns

142 Survey Respondents:
89 Females, 53 Males

6 Interview Respondents:
4 Females, 2 Males
Appendix C: Ethnography Class Year Breakdowns

142 Survey Respondents:
24 Freshmen, 42 Sophomores, 21 Juniors, 53 Seniors

6 Interview Respondents:
1 Freshman, 2 Sophomores, 1 Junior, 2 Seniors
Appendix D: Interview Request Message

I would like to reiterate my appreciation for your prompt response to my survey. The data gathered from your collective responses will provide valuable insight for my study. Much of the data will be used as a foundation to guide a series of interviews, which will also be an integral part of my thesis research.

In order to conduct the interviews, I will need several volunteers. If you are willing to volunteer your time and insight, please respond to this message via email affirming your interest in participating and stating a time and date within the next seven days that you are able to meet. The interview should take about a half an hour. Please understand that your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. As a voluntary participant in this interview, you may refuse to answer any question and you may discontinue participation in the interview at any time and your responses will not be recorded.

Interview responses may be part of the final research report, but your name will NOT be included. Your identity will remain anonymous in all parts of the data analysis, but a nickname or interviewee number may be assigned. By participating in the interview, please note that you are giving the researcher permission to use your responses in his work. The researcher may use recording devices to ensure accurate and effective citation. You will not be compensated for participation.

Contact Information

If you have any specific or general questions about the study, or have questions regarding your rights as a participant of the study, feel free to contact me at jordanti@bc.edu. Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview.