

## **Facebook Official: Defining Legitimacy Outside of a Social Networking Culture**

### **Introduction**

As of 2012, 71% of American Internet users (and 52.56% of the general population) had a presence on Facebook, the number one social networking site in the nation. Of those users, nearly a quarter of them were between the ages of 18 and 24.<sup>1</sup> As an increasingly ubiquitous medium through which young adults develop relationships and identities, Facebook has deeply permeated both individuals' self-concepts and the relationships they form with others. The questions inciting my research are these: To what extent do individuals reshape their profiles to present an ideal within the boundaries of the medium, and how might that ideal reflect back on and reconceptualize a person's actual self-image? To what extent do the selves we imagine online affect the ways that we interact with others offline? And, perhaps most importantly, how does one's constructed Facebook presence contribute to the legitimating of events and relationships that we experience offline?

Beginning in January of 2013, Facebook, for the first time, has seen a decline in the number of active users in the US. I propose to research this phenomenon through an investigation of current university students and recent graduates. Facebook has fundamentally shifted the way that individuals in this demographic communicate and connect with one another. The term "Facebook Official", a popular phrase typically used to describe the publicizing of a romantic relationship on the social network<sup>2</sup>, can be even more broadly applied to the medium's legitimating power. It is through a notion of legitimacy that I will explore the trend of deactivation among this demographic, and probe into how they feel the *legitimacy* of their identity, relationships, and events in the 'Real World' has shifted since making the decision to go offline.

Legitimacy as an anthropological concept has not received as much attention as related terms *authenticity* or *normativity*, both of which can be criteria in a process of legitimating. In this project, I will view the act of legitimating as occurring through identifiable public approval. This approval assimilates exhibitions of identity, relationships, and events into a pre-existing set of rules about what is culturally acceptable. Thus, legitimation "occurs through a collective construction of social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them."<sup>3</sup> Online, that social reality is negotiated between the various communities who comprise a given user's audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Socialbakers, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Kelmer, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Johnson et. al.

When a person deletes or deactivates their Facebook, two key shifts occur in their self-presentation. The first is the erasure of a permanent exhibit of self. One's personal artifacts, including photos, statuses, and even demonstrations of relationships, are no longer on interminable display. The second shift, related to the first, occurs in perceived audience. Because one interacts exclusively in terms of performance (real-time communication bounded by a particular context) rather than maintaining a contextless exhibition<sup>4</sup>, a shift occurs in who has access to your demonstration of self. That shift in audience entails a shift in *who is legitimating* one's performance – who is assessing and assimilating one's actions into a collectively established social order. Weber describes the social order as legitimate “only if action is approximately or on the average oriented to certain determinate ‘maxims’ or rules.”<sup>5</sup> Necessarily the transitive verb, ‘to legitimate’ is an other-focused verb; *something* legitimates *something else*. As opposed to the idea of self-affirmation, legitimacy places the locus of approval in some social or cultural body located outside of the self. In doing so, it grants an authoritative power to that collective body. Facebook users are both a *part* of that body, and under its governance.

As a medium for many-to-many communication<sup>6</sup>, Facebook supports a permanent exhibition of images and signifiers that heavily bound a social code in a normative framework. Scholars who study interaction on Social Networking Systems (SNSs) are fond of using Goffman's dramaturgical analysis<sup>7</sup>, and categorizing communications as performances. Hogan provides a helpful distinction between performances and exhibitions on Facebook, clarifying that “the world is not only a stage but also a library and a gallery.”<sup>8</sup> As retroactive curation of one's personal exhibit serves as a form of impression management, it also reaffirms a normative legitimacy. Marwick and boyd write, “Self-presentation is collaborative.”<sup>9</sup> Through the feedback channels that Facebook provides (likes, comments etc;), users can manipulate their self-presentation to create an exhibition that best displays the events, relationships, and identities that their social network affirms as the most ‘legitimate’, or the most cohesive with collectively established cultural norms.

Those choosing to deactivate Facebook, or those who never had one to begin with, present different material for legitimation to a different kind of audience. Portwood-Stacer recounts the story of one man who logged off of Facebook after the Wikileaks scandal. He found, “People in his network got offended that he was willing to sacrifice his relationships with them over a political issue... [But] Others applauded his stance, and Bruce found himself bonding with his fellow non-users over their

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<sup>4</sup> Hogan, ‘Performances and Exhibitions’

<sup>5</sup> Weber: 31

<sup>6</sup> Marwick and boyd: 114

<sup>7</sup> Goffman, 1959

<sup>8</sup> Hogan, ‘Performances and Exhibitions’: 37

<sup>9</sup> Marwick and boyd: 123

shared independence from the site.”<sup>10</sup> Do these different audiences have different values, and do they legitimate those values in a different way? The principle question behind my research will be, ‘How do those electing not to participate in Facebook culture engage in different schemes of legitimation, and what sort of events, relationships and identities do those schemes encourage?’

## **Research Background**

### ***Why Deactivate?***

Facebook deactivators (or as Laura Portwood-Stacer calls them, conspicuous non-consumers)<sup>11</sup>, provide a variety of reasons for deactivating. Some are concerned with the context collapse between their professional and private lives. One CNN interviewee feared, “You don’t want a future employer to find something that they would deem questionable.”<sup>12</sup> Sometimes it’s easier not to post anything than to negotiate audiences that contain members of a broad array of contexts.<sup>13</sup> Hogan has developed the Lowest Common Denominator theory, in which the decision of what to post is bounded both by “those for whom we seek to present an idealized front and those who may find this front problematic.”<sup>14</sup> Others worry it’s a waste of time, or they’re spending too much time worrying about their cyber-image rather than offline communication, which feels more “real”. Jenny Davis describes a pervasive feeling of ‘technoambivalence’, rooted in the knowledge that technology is both appealing and repulsive.<sup>15</sup> At the same time that it helps you connect to friends, and includes you as part of a normative social structure, “Facebook gets compared to junk food, reality TV, and soap operas.”<sup>16</sup> Regardless of why deactivators have chosen to cease participation, Portwood-Stacer says, “Facebook membership is so widespread at this point as to be taken for granted.”<sup>17</sup> Inevitably, refusal of Facebook takes on a whole new significance when the very act of logging off is counter-normative. Logging off becomes “both a symbolic act and a material one.”

### ***Identity***

I am particularly interested in how Facebook contributes to the legitimation of the Ideal-I.<sup>18</sup> Do the identities that are socially approved online really reflect offline identities, or are they merely self-created idealizations, manifestations of Lacan’s Ideal-I? To what extents do Facebook users identify with their online personae? Goffman writes, “In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves - the role we are striving to live up to - this mask is our

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<sup>10</sup> Portwood-Stacer, ‘Media refusal and Conspicuous non-consumption’

<sup>11</sup> Portwood-Stacer, “Theorizing Social Media Refusal”

<sup>12</sup> Imam, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Vitak; Marwick and boyd

<sup>14</sup> Hogan, ‘Persistence and Change’ : 383

<sup>15</sup> Davis

<sup>16</sup> Portwood-Stacer, “Theorizing Social Media Refusal”. 43:42

<sup>17</sup> Portwood-Stacer, “Theorizing Social Media Refusal”

<sup>18</sup> Lacan

truer self, the self we would like to be.”<sup>19</sup> Sherry Turkle, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of Internet Sociology, asserted early on that people create “separate selves” as they immerse themselves online.<sup>20</sup> Recently, that notion, dubbed ‘digital dualism’ is being disputed. Nathan Jurgenson argues that, “the digital and physical are increasingly meshed,” and argues that Facebook is more an “augmented reality” than a separate one.<sup>21</sup> Facebook founder Marc Zuckerberg himself famously asserted, “You have one identity... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.”<sup>22</sup> Are we the same as our online identity – one unified unit – or are there discrepancies between online and offline presentations? If that lack of integrity is seen as inauthenticity, is that quality at odds with a scheme of legitimacy in a Facebook culture? Hogan writes, “the real distinction is not between the online and offline world, as if they were separate entities, but the mind-in-the-present that interacts with others compared with the digital traces left behind that can be redistributed to audiences.”<sup>23</sup>

Facebook users tend to curate their identities (or those digital traces of their identities that Hogan refers to) in the form of management, defined by Zhao et al as “a conscious effort that involves maintaining, organizing, retrieving, and redistributing personal information for task-related purposes.”<sup>24</sup> The act of managing one’s identity shapes the Ideal-I in a feedback loop that ingests information both from active instances of ‘liking’ and ‘commenting’ and passive observation of others’ profiles and photographs. When one logs off from that feedback loop, how does that impact one’s self-image, both in terms of self-perception and self-presentation?

### ***Relationships***

With relationships, Jenny Davis discusses Facebook as a distanceless space that many feel hinders ‘authentic’ communication. She says, “you may want to catch up with someone, but there is no need because you ‘follow each other on Facebook’ and therefore lose the ability to communicate with one another.”<sup>25</sup> Does Facebook foster faux-relationships and faux-friendships that do not accurately reflect levels of closeness offline? In what ways do Facebook’s News Feed algorithms encourage certain relationships over others? Does logging off strengthen strong ties and cut off weak-ties? On similar lines, what does it mean to ‘defriend’ somebody? Is this an act of illegitimizing your relationship with that person? If one’s Facebook persona is viewed as their ideal self, cutting someone out of that cohesive identity delegitimizes their presence in one’s online life. On the other hand, updating relationship statuses can be seen as a request for legitimation by soliciting public

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<sup>19</sup> Park: 249, as quoted by Goffman

<sup>20</sup> Turkle, *Life On the Screen*

<sup>21</sup> Jurgenson, 2011

<sup>22</sup> Wellman and Raine: 141

<sup>23</sup> Hogan, ‘Persistence and Change’: 313

<sup>24</sup> Zhao et al.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 9:00

approval. Jenny Davis discusses a couple that, in the middle of their wedding, updated their relationship statuses to 'Married', becoming 'Facebook Official'.<sup>26</sup> Recently, writers have angsted over the question "Has Facebook Ruined Love?"<sup>27</sup> – many express the worry that Facebook emphasizes the need for public affirmation of relationships, and that they now revolve around external legitimacy to a greater extent than internal approbation between the pair involved.

Portwood-Stacer has found a new sense of solidarity developing among non-users, and perhaps relationships and friendships between conspicuous non-consumers rely more heavily on self-affirmation than legitimation. Then again, the performative aspects of non-consumption as "distinction from the undesirable masses"<sup>28</sup> could imply that these refusers care just as deeply about social approbation – they're just looking for approval from a counter-culture.

### **Events**

Similarly, when it comes to events, Portwood-Stacer notes non-consumers "bragging about the other "real" experiences they're filling their lives with instead of Facebook."<sup>29</sup> It could be that the scheme of legitimacy supported by counter-Facebook culture sets itself up in distinct opposition to that which Facebook fosters – those things which people see as conflicting with Facebook use suddenly become the most 'legitimate' things to be doing. Naomi Cohen, a self-described "Facebook virgin" says, "for those who value authentic intimacy – even with the side order of gossip – I dare say that a trip to the local farmer's market can be a more effective tool."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, in terms of legitimizing events in a counter-Facebook culture, *authenticity* plays a more important role or is defined differently offline than online (or in a performative rather than exhibitional environment). Facebook non-consumers may establish different schemes of legitimacy around different values, both in terms of types of events, and how they are displayed or performed. Though the non-consumer tendency toward performance differs from the exhibitional display that Facebook users curate,<sup>31</sup> the events that they partake in still request legitimation from some sort of external social order rather than being purely self-affirmative.

### **Research Proposal**

I propose to examine both college students with active Facebook presences and those who have deactivated their accounts, in order to be able to contrast different definitions and dialogues of legitimacy. I plan to conduct in-depth interviews with students from a number of institutions throughout the North-eastern United States,

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, 7:17

<sup>27</sup> Kelmer

<sup>28</sup> Portwood-Stacer, "Theorizing Social Media Refusal"

<sup>29</sup> Portwood-Stacer, "Theorizing Social Media Refusal"

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, 2011

<sup>31</sup> Hogan, 'Performances and Exhibitions'

in Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut and Rhode Island. I will seek to interview students from an array of academic and personal backgrounds, so as to avoid drawing conclusions based on the trends of a particular subset.

My interest in Internet Studies developed in ANSO 205 with Professor Nolan, where we read and discussed Nick Carr's book, *The Shallows*. Since then, I have studied Facebook and Social Media use in Egypt with Dr. Walter Armbrust at the University of Oxford, looking at activist women in Egypt on social networks. Currently, I am working closely with Dr. Bernie Hogan, also at the University of Oxford, to research some of the ideas most pertinent to this proposal. This summer, I will be working through the MIT Initiative for Technology and Self, under the guidance of Dr. Nate Greenslit, where I will be able to observe his methodology and exchange ideas on our related research.

I'm approaching this project having actively used Facebook for over six years and subjectively observing not only my own engagement with the medium, but that of my friends and peers as well.

Interviews with Facebook users will have three sections, one each on identity, relationships, and events. The focus of each of these sections will be to determine a) whether they think their online exhibit accurately reflects offline realities, and b) whether the curation of their online identity is in response to a process of social legitimation.

1. *Identity*: I will begin by asking students about their own online identity: how they chose their profile pictures, what do they think that image says about them, and whether they think it's an accurate portrayal of who they are. This line of questioning is intended to reveal the extent to which Facebook users feel that the selves they present for online legitimation accord with the selves that they present offline. I will also ask about the act of detagging photographs, whether that's something they engage in and why. This act could be viewed as the curation of one's personal exhibit. Wang et al. discuss Facebook regret behaviors<sup>32</sup>; deleting facts or images that provide information regarding one's identity remove those attributes from the arena of public legitimacy.
2. *Relationships*: The next section of questions will be about relationships: whether they're in a 'Facebook Official' relationship with someone and how that impacts the terms of their relationship, what they feel the significance of 'friending' someone is, and whether they have ever 'defriended' anyone and why. Again, the goals of this section of interviews will be to determine a) whether one's online relationships accurately reflect relationships offline, and b) whether curation of relationships and friendships occurs through a desire for legitimation or delegitimation.

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<sup>32</sup> Wang et al.

3. *Events*: The last section of questioning will have to do with events: how does it change 'Real-World' interactions when someone brings a camera, how often do they bring a camera to events with the intention of uploading photographs to Facebook, have they ever been photographed at an event that they wished had gone unpublicized? This section aims to explore the link between real-time offline performances and the publication of those performances online as a part of an exhibition – does photographic presentation (often edited in some way before publishing) accurately reflect offline performance? How, in detagging oneself from an event photograph, does that delegitimize that event?

My hope for these interviews is that the questions will spark an open discussion. Some interviews may even be conducted as small discussion groups so that participants can build off of each other's ideas. With solo interviews, I will likely go through participants' Facebook pages with them, so we can discuss specific items as they pertain to that individual.

Interviews with Facebook non-consumers will run similarly. This group will contain both people who were former Facebook users, and those who never created profiles on the social network. I expect to find certain differences between the categories – possibly in a familiarity with the rules regarding legitimation from an online audience. Also, those who have never had a Facebook will likely not have the same kind of ambivalence towards the media, as they have not left behind a fully formed online identity, complete with long-distance friendships and photographic memories. However, both of these groups now operate in the same bounded contexts of performances as opposed to exhibitions, so I feel that interviews about how they experience legitimation can run similarly.

We will begin broadly with an open discussion of what they feel 'legitimacy' means to them as a social term. We will then discuss identities, relationships and events offline and the extent to which they self-monitor performances of those things. The focus of these interviews will be to determine a) why the interviewee is electing not to participate in Facebook culture, b) how they feel the pressure of social legitimation impacts their performances in an offline world.

1. *Identity*: Questions will include: What do you see as the essential components of your identity? Why are these important to you? How do you feel others view these elements of your identity? To what extent does it matter to you what others think of your identity? The idea with these questions is to elucidate whether offline identities of non-consumers are more determined by self-affirmation or legitimation (an other-implying process).
2. *Relationships*: Questions include: What do you feel are the most important relationships in your life? How do you feel your ability to maintain long-distance relationships has been impacted by not having a Facebook? The aim in this section is to determine which relationships the interviewee legitimates and feels his peers legitimate.

3. *Events*: Questions include: What is your thought process in choosing to attend particular social events? How do you weigh the importance of certain events over others? How do you feel about photos of yourself at an event being posted on Facebook? This section will try to get at the subject's role within a Facebook culture as a non-consumer, and how the dominant scheme of legitimacy may or may not impact his or her own.

With a smaller number of these students, I hope to collect participant observation data, following them throughout the course of yearlong research. With this group, I will try to focus on students who demonstrate a certain level of "Techno-ambivalence" in initial interviews<sup>33</sup>, in the hopes of recording their thought processes through a period of activation or deactivation. Additionally, with this participant observation group, I hope to interview friends and acquaintances of theirs, to gather information not only on their self-perception, but also on how they are perceived socially, by others. Perhaps, over the course of these interviews, a pattern will emerge that could explain the decline in Facebook users amongst its most active demographic. Hopefully, I will be able to give voice to Facebook's recent population ailment, and diagnose it as temporary or terminal.

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<sup>33</sup> Davis



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- [Note: Socialbakers (preferred Facebook marketing developer) is a company offering monitoring and tracking tools for analysis of social networks that are used for comparing social media stats and metrics.]
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(Note: Bibliography will be expanded as the project develops.)