

HOW TO MAKE FACEBOOK YOUR FRIEND: QUEER SELF-PRESENTATION ON A  
HETERONORMATIVE SOCIAL NETWORK SITE

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores queer self-presentation on the social network site, Facebook, emphasizing gendered functionality, gender and queer politics and presentations of gendered identities. It provides a review of early critical cyberculture studies, identity performance and queer theoretical considerations. This study is based on hermeneutic analysis of public profile information and transformative changes of Facebook users as well as in-depth interviews of two queer Facebook users. Results indicate that queer users are always-already gendered, even in the seemingly liberal environment of a social network site, but some, aware of the restrictive structures of Facebook, manipulate presentation to negotiate adequate gender performance. With specific attention to heteronormative structures, this paper challenges former claims of the potential for social progress inherent in social network sites and calls for changes within.

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# **Chapter 1 - Introduction: The Mirror of the Machine Has No Gender**

The mirror of the machine flickers glimpses of possibility, invasion, reflection, invention, fear and progress. Once considered an isolating technology, the computer has transformed human communication and interaction, moving communication from one-to-one to one-to-many and many-to-many (Turkle, 1997). Online communities have developed over time, linking the individual to others and creating potential for fragmentation and self-discovery, eroding the boundaries between the real and the virtual (Turkle, 1997; Turkle, 2011). Computer users have become involved in the simulation not only of the real but also of the self. Through simulation, a subject's identity can be fluid and multiple, and views of the self become less unitary and more protean (Turkle, 1997; Turkle, 2011). It is this element of multiplicity – of stepping outside or beyond oneself and one's physical, social and environmental constraints – that connects the human aspects of creating and experiencing identities to the prism of technology (Turkle, 1997; Turkle, 2011).

Networked technologies began as sources for sharing practical information through relationships (Turkle, 2011). Arpanet, the “grandfather of the Internet” (Turkle, 2011, p. 157), came to fruition to aid collaboration on scientific research papers but soon transformed as a place to brag, gossip, flirt and partake in chatter. The Internet was brimming with new social worlds by the mid-1990s, as chat rooms, multiuser domains and bulletin boards provided popular social environments (Turkle, 2011). Online role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft, Second Life and other avatar-operated games flourished and allowed real-life individuals to create and

live out parallel online lives (Turkle, 2011). Online social worlds provided and continue to provide the materials with which users work and rework identity (Turkle, 2011).

Within the prism of technology, social network sites (SNSs) have gleamed brightly. SNSs are the height of contemporary communication, with millions of users logging on every day to share and connect (Facebook, 2011). Since the inception of the first recognizable social network site – SixDegrees.com – launched in 1997, SNSs have transformed and, therefore, have transformed communication (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The popularity of the SNS as a form of new media has led to plentiful research on the subject, but danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) have given the most comprehensive and acknowledged accounts to date, defining SNSs as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

Scholarly attention has been drawn to SNSs, typically focusing on the effects within nodes rather than the individual (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Past research exists that connects identity development to dating site profiles and blogging (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), but the literature on SNSs is still evolving to increase understanding of the impact participation in such sites has on particular users and how the users communicate identity to those in his or her network.

Sherry Turkle (1984, 1997, 2011) has done extensive ethnographic work in the areas of online and real-life identity for users of various types of social networks, but a lack of attention to gender and sexual dimensions in the field is apparent (van Doorn, 2010). Cyberculture studies have addressed gender and sexuality on the internet, ranging from psychological interests in

behavior to anthropological community-building, political feminist movements and sociolinguistic gendered language patterns (van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2008). In previous research, men and women are often separated into their binary categories and lumped together, which subscribes the seemingly boundless domains of the Internet to homogeneous analysis. The marginalized – or non-heterosexual – others have received slight attention (van Doorn, 2010).

It is the burgeoning social network sites and individualized identity experiences – including all types of gender identity – that has yet to be prodded deeply, and the structures of SNSs provide a framework for understanding technological and social norms that should be explored (van Doorn, 2010). The present study attempts to assess the experiences of identity construction and presentation of queer<sup>1</sup> subjects on Facebook by investigating self-presentation and gender performance within the theoretical framework of Erving Goffman and queer theories. By examining Facebook as a platform for social networking, this research aims to reveal a contemporary cultural reflection of how socially-marginalized subjects navigate around and through the boundaries of fixed identity.

This study's specific research objectives include: determining the unique experiences of individual Facebook users; assessing initial user construction and continual presentation of identity on Facebook; assessing user gender construction and continual performance and presentation on Facebook; obtaining insights on individual experience of navigating bounded, systematic structures of Facebook and gaining individual perspective of the context of participating on Facebook in general and as a person who identifies as queer.

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<sup>1</sup> For use in this paper, “queer” can be defined as an inclusive umbrella term for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, genderqueer, or of any other non-heterosexual sexuality, sexual anatomy or gender identity.



The exploratory nature of this research lends it to exploratory methodologies. Text-based hermeneutic analysis and in-depth interviews provide contexts meaningful for discovering interpretations and perceptions of texts and experiences in nuanced ways. The theoretical framework best suited for this type of exploration is that of Erving Goffman's self-presentation and gender performance within queer theories. By combining sociological thought on performance with queer theory, the presentations of subjects involved can be set against a backdrop for relevant interpretation.

This study's scope is based on the availability and depth of gender presentation on Facebook as rooted in text as well as the proximity of individuals for interviewing. Even though the Internet is structured with text, the text-based analysis does not include analysis of photography in the subjects' presentations on Facebook. This thesis will elaborate on the current contexts of social network sites and Facebook, provide a review of identity online and theoretical framework of Goffman and queer theories, outline the chosen methodologies and their implementations, present research findings and proffer discussion for implications, conclusions, limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Social Network Sites: To Be Is to Type Yourself into Being**

Social network sites allow users to connect to other users on the basis of exploring new connections that would not be made outside of the network, but users primarily connect to reinforce communications within a pre-existing extended social network (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Once an individual joins an SNS, he or she fills out a general information survey, which coalesces to create the backbone of the SNS: the user profile (boyd & Ellison, 2007). By providing specific information, a user ceases to remain anonymous and becomes written – or typed – into being (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Sunden, 2003). The profile anchors the user and his or

her network; it showcases an articulated list of Friends<sup>2</sup>; personal information, such as age, location, interests and an “about me” section; and the content surrounding interactions and identifications, such as groups and affiliations (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

While similarities exist in the general frameworks among SNSs, differences abound regarding specific cultures and interests, technological architectures, visibility, access and practices (boyd and Ellison, 2007; van Doorn, 2010). SNSs can be medium-based, such as the first generation of Twitter with its 140-character limit or the music-based MySpace. Various Web 2.0 staples, such as the visually-propelled YouTube and Flickr, have added SNS components as they have advanced through next generations, allowing users to interact, rather than simply observe or act. In contrast, MySpace and Facebook have revolved around interaction throughout the creation and maintenance of social networks online (van Doorn, 2010). MySpace and Facebook have outlasted most other SNSs, with Facebook leading in popularity (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2008).

### ***Facebook and its Norms***

Founded by a Harvard student on February 4, 2004, Facebook has risen to the top of SNSs and has since set the bar in terms of accessibility, functionality and adaptability (Facebook, 2011; boyd & Ellison, 2007). Currently, Facebook has more than 500 million active users, of whom fifty percent log in on any given day (Facebook, 2011). Facebook’s online domination is not derived simply from its site-based users; since April 2010, approximately 10,000 new websites integrate with Facebook each day through social plug-ins (Facebook, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> “Friends” are defined as users within a particular user’s social network.

The mission of Facebook is to “give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2011). From 2004 to 2006, the Facebook demographic was composed of college students; a user had to register with an “.edu” email address (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In 2007, after Facebook had merged to form a high school variation of the college network, the growing SNS became a public access site (Ellison et al, 2007). Facebook’s mission of openness and connectedness may span the masses, but its structures and functionality are homogeneous and heteronormative.

However, in terms of SNS adaptations, the appearance and functionality of Facebook have changed since its inception. The current components of a user’s main profile page are determined by the information the user discloses upon registration. This includes Basic Information, Profile Picture, Featured People, Education and Work, Philosophy, Arts and Entertainment, Sports, Activities and Interests and Contact Information. Basic Information is comprised of self-inputted Current City, Hometown, I Am (to establish sex; either female or male, with the option available to display sex), Birthday, Interested In (women or men; the user may check both or neither), Languages and About Me. A user can choose to select a profile picture or leave the picture blank. The Featured People section includes Relationship Status, which provides the option to leave it blank or list Single, In a Relationship, Engaged, Married, It’s Complicated, In an Open Relationship, Widowed, Separated, Divorced, In a Civil Union or In a Domestic Partnership. Some of the options allow users to dictate with whom they share such relationships, if that person is another Facebook user. Featured People also includes Family, with options of Father, Mother, Daughter, Son, Sister, Brother, Uncle, Aunt, Niece, Nephew, Cousin (male), Cousin (female), Grandson, Granddaughter, Grandfather and Grandmother. The Education and Work information allows the user to input Employer,

College/University and High School, with corresponding dates of attendance or involvement. Philosophy is user-generated and comprised of Religion, Political Views, People Who Inspire You and Favorite Quotations. Arts and Entertainment spans Music, Books, Movies, Television and Games for which the user can input titles and artists. Sports includes Sports You Play, Favorite Teams and Favorite Athletes. The Activities and Interests tab is generated by the user. Lastly, the components of Contact Information include Email(s), IM Screen Name(s), Phone(s), Address, Neighborhood, Residence, Room, School Mailbox and Website(s). These categories of identification function on a continuum of restriction and flexibility, from the option of the choice among prescribed information to the openness of creating user-generated content within the structure of the Facebook profile page.

To an extent, a Facebook user may choose which information is public or private. Once the user inputs the above information, the main profile page typically reflects his or her name, regulated to first and last name, and a profile picture and recent pictures. A summary of information, including employer, education, current location, relationship status, hometown, birthday and spoken languages is featured at the top of the profile page, and the Wall cascades below. The Wall is composed of information the user chooses to share (Status, Question, Photo, Link and Video), others' comments and shared media and the user's activity or history<sup>3</sup>; information the user chooses to display. Additionally featured on the profile are Photos, Notes and Friends. At the most private, a user can withhold all of his or her information except for his or her name and a profile picture. Research has shown that comfort in publicizing information corresponds to the age of the user, with the Net Generation more willing to provide information

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<sup>3</sup> The "history" on Facebook is a record on a user's profile that documents all communication, except for personal communication (messages and chats); this includes comments, posts, tagged photos, groups joined, events attended, etc.

than generations prior (Livingstone, 2008). Users have the ability to create groups and create groups excluding all but selected users for participation. Privacy settings can alter the function and appearance of the Profile and the Wall, permitting communication as involved as another user “liking” one’s new “friending” or attending an event to that as restricted as communicating via private message. Users have the ability to display the archives of his or her participations, including attendance to events; acquisition of new Friends; communication on the Walls of other users, events, groups, activities, etc.; and any and all changes made to the Profile – except for deletions.

boyd (2007) notes that online public places like Facebook influence the social development of youth by allowing individuals to express themselves, make sense of social norms that regulate society, learn by others’ reactions and realize expressions or acts by witnessing and acknowledging them. Representations of the self on Facebook are hinged to the user’s profile, with the network functioning as the public space (boyd, 2007).

Regardless of the variety of accessibility of a user’s profile, functionality of the network or adaptability of the network to user demands and technological changes, Facebook and other SNSs allow users to create online identities or reflections of real-life identities, with the latitude to alter the ideal image that is portrayed to the general public (Pennington, 2010). Construction and molding of identity in a public place invites analysis through theoretical considerations of Erving Goffman’s self-presentation and performance and queer theory’s gender performance and identity construction.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review of Theory**

### **Identity Online: How to Be Being**

This review of literature highlights theories relevant to the study. This includes Erving Goffman's concepts of identity, self-presentation and performance; various scholars' interpretations of queer theory and performance; and the merging of these ideas as the present study entails. The review will include explanation of how the theories presented pertain to online identity and Facebook.

#### ***Erving Goffman's Identity, Self-Presentation and Performance***

Identity is an unfixed term, defined in many ways and constructed in continual processes and comprised of unlimited influences. The sociologist Erving Goffman defined identity by three parts: the "personal," the "social" and the "ego" (Goffman, 1963). The personal is what makes individuals unique, from "identity pegs," such as fingerprints, to personal life histories (Goffman, 1963). The social identity is how others understand the individual on the basis of the groups to which he or she belongs. The ego identity is how the individual thinks about him or herself (Goffman, 1963). While Goffman was not alive for the onset of the Internet, his theories of presentation and performance match well with concepts of online identity.

Goffman (1959) developed the phrase "impression management" to define how individuals manage how others receive their identities. Goffman (1959) explains:

In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically (obliges others) to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to things he does not appear to be. The

others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the “is.” (p. 13, emphasis in original)

For individuals to use impression management successfully and stage a character – or identity, specifically, and one online, in this case – they must convey involvement, self-control, adherence to a status quo and awareness of the variety of receivers (or Friends) to minimize the possibility of mistakes (Goffman, 1959). Impression management situates the individual as “a reflexive, acting subject...without returning to either biological or psychological essentialism” (Brickell, 2005, p. 29). Goffman focuses on the performance of self – an ontologically stable self existing outside of the social realm but imbued with agency and constructed socially (Brickell, 2005). Goffman’s setting of performance of self must be one of control, one of homogeneity and one in the “front region,” bound by perception (1959). “Frames” are the settings that govern social interactions, influence the construction of meanings of certain situations and organize subjective experience (Goffman, 1974; van Doorn, 2010).

Goffman restricted his microsociological analysis to face-to-face interaction, but his theories permeated into studies of mediated interaction and mass media long before the inception of the Internet. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985, 1989) applied Goffman’s notions of “frontstage” and “backstage” areas to television in the 1980s, and he explained that TV functioned as an in-between, revealing the coarser “backstage” to the public and altering perceptions of social constructs, such as class, minority status, authority, social divisions and more (Lowe, 1986; Meyrowitz, 1985). Meyrowitz (1985) claimed that new information flow of television realigned group identities, or affiliations; socialization stages, or transition and ranks of hierarchy, or authority and created a “middle region.” He also pointed out the difference in flow and formality of presentation, indicating that print media segregate information and present it formally and

impersonally, while electronic media integrate information and present it informally, intimately and expressively (Meyrowitz, 1985). These sorts of front-stage/back-stage comparisons of television and the evolution of media prove valuable in assessing presentation on SNSs.

Other scholars have used Goffman's and Meyrowitz's ideas to analyze various media and propose their influences on social order (Boden & Molotch, 1994; Fortunati, 2005; Heath and Luff, 1992). Boden and Molotch (1994) purport that face-to-face communication is preferred and affords body talk, communication efficiency and thicker information. Research involving participants in video- and audio-mediated environments suggests that subjects experience a sense of copresence in a shared social space (Ackerman et al., 1997; Heath and Luff, 1992). Mobile phone research has led to claims that mobile phone calls create "parallel front stages" and blur boundaries between public and private spaces (Cooper, 2001; Ling, 1997). Just as these changes in mediated environments are grounded in the subject's perceptions of shared social experiences, emphasis on the subject can be analyzed online.

Goffman's subject is one of agency. Online, the individual navigates in accordance with frames of the social network site and manages impressions by remaining engaged and interactive, but utilizing restraint in doing so, playing by the rules of the status quo and structures inherent in the network and its users and remaining "self-reflexive" or "self-monitoring" (Foucault, 1990; Giddens, 1991). The user is a clear "doer" of a deed, although such actions are constrained by the social environment in which they appear (van Doorn, 2010). Goffman (1959) states that "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (p. 35). Likewise, Facebook users adapt their profiles and performances in accordance with their perceived audiences (Pennington, 2010). Goffman's definition of a status as a realized, immaterial social



place that is a pattern of appropriate conduct is also represented by Facebook users' willingness to embellish or diminish and articulate their various roles in daily life as measured by indicators of authenticity and activity (Pennington, 2010; Skog, 2005).

Goffman's framework for understanding identity, self-presentation and performance constitute an important research context for investigations of SNSs and online representations of self (boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, Goffman's account does not foretell the altering of such processes by mediated communication online (boyd, 2008). The subject works through the process of typing oneself into being by working through identity in new ways and using the tools to articulate this, which, online, often occurs without the direct feedback of impression management (boyd, 2008). Feedback allows the user to build and navigate an identity that "works" online.

Similarly, Goffman does not account for gender performance or gender identity. The analytical lens of queer theories affords investigation into the online construction, presentation and performance of gender.

### *Queer Theory and Performance*

Throughout gender and technology studies of the past fifteen years, many scholars have accepted that technology and gender are co-constructed, meaning they are mutually constitutive (Cartensen, 2009; Wajcman, 2004). In this lies the recognition that gender and technology are socially constructed and each plays a significant role in the construction of the other (Cartensen, 2009). To study gender relations on social network sites, it is vital to incorporate technological changes and operations as well as social transformations regarding gender (Cartensen, 2009). For example, the internet has been proclaimed a setting dominated by heteronormativity, from its binary construction to cyber-bullying and gay-bashing in comment sections (Postbinary Gender

Chores, 2011). For the context of this paper, gender is understood through Tanja Cartensen's articulation:

Gender is understood as socially constructed, which means that gendered subjects do not exist previously with different interest and attributes but are produced by embodied and discursive practices in social interactions... Gender becomes naturalized (and) organized... on a structural level; on a level of representations as images of femininity and masculinity or gender norms, symbols and discourses, which negotiate how men and women have to behave; and on an individual level in the creation of identities, or subject positions as "male" or "female" or "other." (Cartensen, 2009, p. 108)

In computer mediated communication or on SNSs, gender roles have played significant roles in "bodiless" interaction. The user's performed gender remains relevant and serves as a reference point, even though the physical gendered body is not present in virtual interactions (Funken, 2002). Only a few SNSs are available for use in which the individual can become a member without defining him or herself as male or female, such as the photo-sharing site flickr.com and the music-sharing sites last.fm and grooveshark.com (Wötzel-Herber, 2008). However, by participating on Facebook, users are forced to position themselves as either female or male, regardless of their choice to make such a gender identity evident on their profiles.

Unlike Goffman's attribution of active subject, Butler (1990) argues that a stable subjectivity cannot be assumed; rather, it is the act of performing gender that constitutes the subject. "Performance" implies an active subject that can "do" gender (van Doorn, 2010). Constituting acts create the identity of the actor and do so "as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" (Butler, 1988, p. 520, emphasis in original). However, the gender binary in the structures of SNSs is inscribed into the technology, and positioning the user as other than male or female is

technically impossible (Cartensen, 2009). SNSs preserve offline male-female dichotomies through online self-presentation and possibly intensify offline gender norms. Tanja Cartensen (2009) states that “gender, mostly in combination with heteronormativity, can be considered the most important category in the self-construction of (users’) identities” (p. 113).

As in Goffman’s theory of identity, many ideas of identity within queer theories take into account the construction of identity and its derivatives (Connolly, 1991; Muñoz, 1999; Pêcheux, 1982; Sedgwick, 1990). William E. Connolly (1991) considers identity a site of struggle where socially-constituted definitions clash against fixed dispositions. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) explains that identification is complex; in identifying *with* something, a simultaneous identifying *against* occurs, which is called counteridentification. Michel Pêcheux (1982) built a theory of disidentification from Louis Althusser’s (1971) theory of subject formation and interpellation, in which disidentification is an approach that deals with working on and against dominant ideology. José Muñoz (1999) has described disidentification as a process of “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” (p. 31) that “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (p. 31).

In order for heteronormative hegemony to exist, semiotic gender acts of the mundane must be continually repeated (Butler, 1990). Offline, these acts would include the use of language, gesture and symbols. Online, these acts would reflect the everyday notions of self-presentation, including posts, comments, emoticons and other interactions, both social and dormant (as on a profile). Queer users can disidentify online through mundane acts. Similar to the fiction of identity, the distinction between public and private or personal and political is a

fiction that supports hegemony, as even the most personal acts are constituted by social conventions and ideologies (Felluga, 2011; Hall, 2003). The acts that one performs by citing the ideologies and conventions of society, however, construct the lived reality and create the appearance of necessity and nature, even though such a reality remains a social construction (Butler, 1990; Felluga, 2011).

This study calls for the application of queer theory and Goffmanian theory in concert.

### *Merging Goffman and Queer Theories*

Erving Goffman's theories of performance provide the framework for practical implementation of studying particular events and frames for self-presentation on Facebook, while queer theories proffer a backdrop upon which these may be compared and contrasted. By combining Goffmanian and queer theoretical perspectives, this study aims to consider online signifiers of self-presentation as concrete examples of how queer individuals perform gender in specific contexts. It also attempts to analyze the specific instance in which queer users adhere to the "*regulatory practices* of gender formation" (Butler, 2006, p. 23, emphasis in original) on Facebook, such as a Facebook-public coming out or public gender transformation. This results in the following research questions:

RQ1: How are gender and sexuality articulated on the Facebook profiles of queer users?

RQ2: How do queer Facebook users present the performance of a gender transformation on their profiles?

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology: Hermeneutic Analysis and Depth**

### **Interviews**

#### **Research Design and Justification**

In order to delve into the content on Facebook and closely examine the presentations of identity and performance of queer users, this study employed textual analysis through hermeneutics to derive meaning from the structure and discourse of texts already present as well as face-to-face depth interviews to gain personal perspective. The research design and justification, participants and setting and procedures and data analysis are outlined with respect to the two research methods employed in the current study.

#### ***Textual Analysis and Hermeneutics***

Textual analysis allows deconstruction of texts to examine “how texts operate, the manner in which they are constructed, the ways in which meanings are produced, and the nature of those meanings” (Lockyer, 2008, p. 865). Textual analysis can be used to identify what interpretations of text are possible and likely, since texts are polysemic. Through scrutiny and close reading, textual analysis can provide potential for thorough discussion of “presentational and structural specifics and subtleties that would remain unidentified if a cursory analysis was conducted” (Lockyer, 2008, p. 865). Attention to nuance, particularities and context can be achieved in this method, which is vital for exploration into analyzing the constructs of self-presentation and performance on a social network site. As texts exist in society prior to the research, textual analysis also maintains the nature of such constructs as they originated, rather than interfering (Lockyer, 2008).

Textual analysis – and more specifically, hermeneutics – is the best methodological approach for this study because it is exploratory and inductive. Rather than a quantitative content analysis that objectifies manifest texts to be measured, a qualitative, hermeneutic analysis allows interpretation of text that is subjective, implicit and even missing or silent. Hermeneutics enables the researcher to evaluate engagements with the “dynamic and historically situated nature of human understanding” (Freeman, 2008). Employing hermeneutics results in the interpretation of texts in a careful, detailed way and brings attention to all types of communication – verbal and nonverbal – as well as the contexts that affect that communication.

Close-reading, such as that found in the detailed analysis common in literature disciplines, and thick description, derived from interpretive anthropology, will be used. Clifford Geertz’s (1973) “thick description” has been defined as “the most effective tool in the (researcher’s) toolkit for teasing out the ‘text’ of culture, that is, the fine details of human life that make behavior intelligible” (Erickson & Murphy, 2008). As modes of performance and processes of production are the focus of this research, employing Stuart Hall’s (1980) theory of encoding/decoding messages will enable thorough readings. Hall’s theory identifies decoding different ideological messages through three positions of decoding: the dominant-hegemonic position, in which the receiver decodes the message, accepts it and reproduces the preferred reading; the negotiated position, where the receiver acknowledges the constructed discourse and sometimes modifies it to reflect his/her own interests but doesn’t challenge it; and the oppositional position, in which the receiver understands the preferred reading but demystifies and deconstructs it through rejection. Discussion of the fine details and artistry of self-presentation and performance calls for such thorough explanations.

Facebook, its components, its users and the behaviors of its users have been analyzed objectively in previous studies through various methodologies; the purpose of this research is to identify the representations as parts of dialogic, holistic, dynamic and self-reflective processes that continuously develop interpretation and understanding. In addition to the observer's text-oriented analysis, depth interviews extend the exploratory reach of the study and supplement the research.

### *Depth Interviews*

Depth interviews are appropriate for this study, due to the potential of discovering detailed information about individuals' thoughts and behaviors as well as the exploration of new issues, such as authorial intent and reflexivity. Flexibility is afforded by the interview technique in permitting close examination of the interviewee's responses to a broad range of questions. This range of questions spans the gamut of self-presentation; Facebook identity creation, maintenance and manipulation, including gender identity; motivational considerations for the prior; and understanding of presentation, audience and interpretation.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured so that the researcher retained some control over the direction of the content discussed while the participants could elaborate or take the discussion in new but related directions. This flexibility provides the researcher with in-depth information on the relevant topics but prevents him or her from predetermining the results (Cook, 2008).

The pairing of hermeneutic analysis with depth interviews provides perspectives based on the researcher's interpretations as well as the participants' and produces rich accounts of the settings and phenomena of queer gender identity, self-presentation and performance on Facebook.

## Participants and Setting

### *Hermeneutic Analysis*

In congruence with the specific qualification of non-heterosexual or queer Facebook users necessary for this study, the population demographic was not uniform or intentionally representative of the general population. The participants needed were gathered with the intent to represent a distinct marginalized culture. Even more specific in aim was the involvement of queer individuals who had recently experienced a Facebook-public gender transformation<sup>4</sup>. Contrary to many studies where similarity effects are avoided, this purposive study sought to find a specific population of Facebook users, so a snowball non-probability sample was employed to garner qualifying participants.

Subjects in this study must have been “active users,” or individuals who participate in public Facebook communication<sup>5</sup> at least once a day. These users must have been “typical” in that they withheld from performing expressions of extremes<sup>6</sup>. Informed consent was obtained and anonymity guaranteed. Each potential subject received a message via Facebook that explained the study and its research goals. With emphasis on anonymity throughout the process,

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<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this study, a “Facebook-public gender transformation” is defined as a declaration of change in the presentation of one gender type to another on Facebook (as Facebook affords identification as “Male,” “Female” or “Other” and “Interested In” categories comprised of similar options). For example, a Facebook user who identified as a straight male would go through a public gender transformation when he would change his “Looking For” to “Men” and announce through a status update, “I’m gay.” For the purposes of this study, a public gender transformation on Facebook should be considered different from a real-life sexuality transformation.

<sup>5</sup>This study considers “public communication” as any communication that is readily observable; messages and chats are not public.

<sup>6</sup> Performing in extremes would include a user’s tendency to post for a narrow audience; for instance, if a user was a part of the KSU Young Democrats and she only posted political articles, she would be an outlier from the typical user, who tends to post about a range of topics.



the users were asked to serve as examples for this study simply by allowing their profile information to be included in the study.

The setting originated within the researcher's grasp—within the bounds of a social network of a student attending a large Midwestern university. This is not to say that the network was physically-bound. The researcher's network was comprised mostly of Friends who were physically located near a large Midwestern university, but the subjects involved in the research had not necessarily previously or ever been in the physical area of the researcher.

A possible cohort count could not be estimated prior to the recruitment of subjects, but it resulted that ten respondents claimed sexual orientation of non-heterosexual (or the catch-all “queer” for purposes of this study) and were willing to provide access to their Facebook profiles for textual analysis. Not all of the subjects were listed as each other's Friends on Facebook, though some of them were previously connected through social networks. While all of the subjects fall in the gender category of “queer,” their relationship statuses, gender performances and depth of personal information portrayed in their profiles varied. They are identified in this study by pseudonyms, and any material that might reveal their identity has been excluded or altered.

The duration of the hermeneutic analysis consisted strictly of the time corresponding to the observation of text available on the information pages of the subjects' profiles and the history available for viewing on subjects' walls. The specific setting for the research was the main profile page and wall of each subject. The amount and kind of information presented varied among subjects of the study. Subjects agreed to allow access to information generally disclosed to their Friends by accepting a friend request from the researcher. The researcher restricted

exchanges with each subject to viewing, not interacting, in order to maintain a background presence.

### *Depth Interviews*

After hermeneutic analysis was conducted, two particular subjects displayed subtle manipulations of the given structural presentation categories on Facebook through specific settings and adjustments of Profile and Wall content. These two individuals happened to be residing in the same area of the researcher – a large Midwestern university community – and agreed to speak with the researcher on the grounds of guaranteed anonymity.

The interviews were conducted in a private space, and the researcher used a recording device for audio recording and took written notes throughout the interview. Interviewees were presented with the researcher's perspective of their Facebook profile pages and walls and were allowed to log on, scroll through and search for various presentations and cues of presentation. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

**Table 3.1 Participant Information**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex*</b>	<b>Interested In</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>
Don	Male	Not listed	Not listed
Jake	Male	Men	In a relationship
Kate	Not listed	Not listed	In a relationship
Jenny	Not listed	Not listed	Married
Peter	Male	Men	In a relationship
Ann	Female	Men and Women	In a relationship
Mark	Male	Not listed	Engaged
Kerry	Female	Not listed	Divorced
Jack	Male	Not listed	Not listed
Tessa	Female	Not listed	In a relationship

\* “Sex” is the category featured on Facebook profiles.

## Procedures and Data Analysis

As addressed in the literature review, the current version of Facebook operates upon the information provided by the user to create a profile page of user information and a wall of activity and interaction. These two facades were treated differently but scoured in the same manner for each user.

User-inputted information serves as the fulcrum for identity on social network sites. Such presentations, while determined by the user, are dictated with variance by the SNS format. User information on Facebook is separated into Basic Information, Profile Picture, Featured People, Education and Work, Philosophy, Arts and Entertainment, Sports, Activities and Interests and Contact Information. Within these sections of identification are subcategories for further detail and expression. Particular attention was placed on the categories of potential gender performance that appeared to be “restrictive” and “flexible.” Restrictive categories related to the provided or given structures of the Facebook informational form that were reflective of the user’s potential gender performance. These included: “I Am” (male or female; option to display), “Interested In” (women or men; may claim both or neither) and “Relationship Status” ([blank], Single, In a Relationship, Engaged, Married, It’s Complicated, In an Open Relationship, Widowed, Separated, Divorced, In a Civil Union, In a Domestic Partnership; option to declare with whom). Flexible categories that provided users more freedom for inputting their own text-based information potentially representing the user’s gender performance included: “About Me,” “Philosophy” (Religion, Political Views, People Who Inspire You, Favorite Quotations) and “Activities and Interests.” Notations of users’ gender performances were compiled and analyzed on an individual and holistic basis.

A user's profile page also provides a wall, or the space in which expressions and interactions are based and rooted to the specific user. The wall is comprised of information the user chooses to share (Status, Question, Photo, Link, Video), others' comments and shared media and the user's activity or history. The wall serves as the most unlimited aspect of communication on Facebook. For this particular study, concentration upon the user's gender performance as expressed on the wall takes precedence over others' interactions and reactions as well as the user's performance of gender ideology.

Information providing opportunity for gender performance – both restrictive and fixed – was analyzed in the context of the user's choice to post or not post. The analysis of the participant's words and phrasing proved implications of gender and sexual orientation. An example of a useful status is, "I love my boyfriend." The update conveys a user's gender performance, as it operates on the assumption that "boy" signifies male and "boyfriend" signifies an initial and ongoing sexual attraction and preference as well as a commitment to that individual within that relationship<sup>7</sup>. Special attention was placed on performances containing similar implications rather than those conveying mundane presentations, such as "My dog ate my paper."

In this study, the contents of each user's profile spoke for that particular user, but the analysis aimed to represent the queer demographic and its positionality. The interviews provided perspective on the individual experience of the queer Facebook user.

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<sup>7</sup> Further explication on the potential limitations of assumed social and cultural linguistic norms can be found in the limitations section.

## **Chapter 4 - Findings**

### **It's All Queer: a Brief Introduction**

The sample of subjects of the hermeneutic analysis consisted of ten queer-identifying individuals, of whom five identified as male, three as female and two did not show their identification on their profiles. None of the subjects listed their ages or birth-years. Of the ten subjects, only three displayed the “Interested In” identification and four performed a relationship status change depicting gender performance. On Facebook, the signifier for a change in the representation of gender sought after (“Interested In”/“Looking For”) is: “(User) changed (his/her) Looking For.” The signifier for a relationship status change is, “(User) is in a relationship (with [User]).” Three users displayed no gender performance through flexible categories, while the seven who did showed histories of status updates, group involvement and event attendance. Two subjects did not identify a category for sex, but each of them had contrasting frequency of gender performances in flexible modes.

The illustration shows the summary of each participant’s profile in terms of gender performance. Even though all of the subjects involved considered themselves queer, similarities beyond that basic gender identification are few.

### **No Norms: To Each His or Her or Not-Listed Own**

The following summaries are sketches of each subject’s Facebook profile and activities as related to gender performance. The two interview participants, Jo and Mark, have additional findings listed after the hermeneutic analysis. The following descriptions provide data in response to the two research questions of this study as they pertain to hermeneutic analysis:

*RQ1: How are gender and sexuality articulated on the Facebook profiles of queer individuals?*

*RQ2: How do queer individuals present the performance of a gender transformation on their Facebook profiles?*

### ***Don: A Ghost***

Don had 192 Facebook friends and listed himself as hailing from a small Midwestern town and residing in a slightly larger Midwestern town at the time of the analysis. Don's profile displayed that he had attended a small public university. The researcher loaded Don's wall until the oldest post was found, which occurred on Aug. 16, 2006, at 7:57 p.m.

Don's Facebook profile listed him as a male who did not display a relationship status or an "Interested In" category. Don did not list any groups or activities that would imply gender performance; similarly, none of his status updates or history alluded to gender performance on Facebook.

Don's profile history did not make evident any sort of transformational gender performance. However, he had communicated with the researcher and indicated he had come out on Facebook but did not think the record was available. Don may have deleted the history associated with his Facebook outing.

Speculation can be made on the part of the observer as to whether or not Don had ever participated in Facebook more readily and to what extent he removed the archives of his interactions. Perhaps Don's upbringing, former location and current residence proved stifling for his sexuality in real-life contexts, and he felt similar pressures to adhere to heterosexual norms by presenting himself as silent or non-sexual on Facebook. Don's self-identification as a qualified subject for this study – his claim to the researcher that he was gay and had come out on

Facebook at some point in his time as a user – could not have been proven had he not had personal communication with the researcher. This poses interesting questions about Don’s real-life sexual identity, his online gender performance (or lack thereof) and the correlation of the two.

It seems that Don’s public existence on Facebook is as a non-sexual male. He operates more as a ghost. He’s there, but he proffers no substance to the onlooker. He has a presence, but it is one of which the viewer cannot be sure. Don is not in an oppositional position but is navigating between a negotiated position and dominant hegemonic position. With his choice to include “Male” as his “sex,” his front-stage display of sexual identity is conforming to a male/female binary. His lack of information in the “Interested In” field, however, may allude to a negotiated position, as he posts his sex but does so without committing to upholding or denying a presentation of sexual identity.

If Don participates to the contrary with gender performance through interactions with the friends in his network, he deletes the archives of such interactions, has privacy settings to accommodate their exclusion or does so through private means, such as messaging and chatting. Facebook, as a mediated environment, does not expose back-stage behavior if the subject does not allow it. The only blurring of boundaries is the information presented, but Facebook does not require presentation other than the fixed profile information. Don does not present enough of a “self” to portray much front-stage behavior, not to mention even a window to back-stage behavior that SNSs have been claimed to afford.

As a gay male on Facebook, Don is in a liminal position of marginality. Don’s presentation is that of an indefinite identity as he is not publicly resisting or confounding Facebook’s or society’s prescriptive patterns of identification. His ambiguity and silence speak



to the confining elements of the contemporary standards of identity as dictated through Facebook.

### ***Jack: Another Ghost***

Jack also had minimum gender performance on his profile. He listed no friends, no former or current residence and no university. Similar to Don, the only item he listed was “Male” for sex. Jack listed no relationship status and no “Interested In” category. His profile reflected no performed gender transformation or flexible gender performance, such as updating his status, attending events or joining groups. Jack’s level of disregard or acceptance of Facebook operating structures is unclear.

Just like Don, Jack’s public existence on Facebook is as a non-sexual male. He operates on Facebook like a ghost in that his presence is simply detectable. Like Don, Jack is navigating between a negotiated position and dominant hegemonic position. With his choice to include “Male” as his “sex,” his front-stage display of sexual identity is conforming to a male/female binary. Jack may negotiate his participation on Facebook, though, as he chooses not to display information in the “Interested In” field and maintains a character of silence and ambiguity.

### ***Jake: Present and Proud, but Not Very Loud***

Jake listed male as his category of sex on his Facebook profile. He depicted that he was interested in men and was currently in a relationship with another Facebook user, who was identified with what can be considered a predominantly male name. Jake had 454 friends and was from and residing in a Midwestern metropolitan city. He studied at a large Midwestern university. The researcher loaded Jake’s profile through his earliest post at 11:42 a.m. on March 15, 2005.

Jake's transformational gender performance record detailed that he had changed his "Interested In"/"Looking For" category to men and that he had then changed his relationship status to "In a Relationship." Jake was the most active of all of the participants in terms of gender performance, having joined seven groups and produced three status updates. The sequence of Jake's performance is as follows:

(A) March 15 – March 16, 2007: Jake joined the group "Supporting the Trevor Project."

(B) Oct. 24 – Oct. 28, 2007: Jake joined the group "(University) LGBT Office."

(C) Nov. 8, 2007 at 11:37 a.m.: Jake is "soooo gay...."

a. User: "There's no way your (sic) gay....noooo way...."

(D) Jan. 31, 2008 at 9:17 p.m.: Jake "is gay."

(E) Jan. 27, 2010 – Feb. 1, 2010: Jake changed his Looking For to Men.

a. 4 people like this.

b. User: "LOVE this."

(F) Feb. 5, 2010 at 12:40 a.m.: Jake went from being Single to In a Relationship.

a. 4 people like this.

(G) Aug. 25, 2010 at 11:10 p.m.: Jake is in a relationship with (another male).

a. 5 people like this.

b. User: "LOVE. =)"

c. User: "like like like like like...don't you wish you could like something more than once?"

(H) Aug. 30, 2010 at 2:56 p.m.: Jake got to see his awesome boyfriend for the first time in 3.5 weeks."

a. 10 people like this.

(I) At the time of the study, Jake was involved in the following groups, for which there is no timeline:

- a. “NO H8 Campaign”
- b. “No on Prop 8”
- c. “American Foundation for Equal Rights”
- d. “Focus of Pride”
- e. “Gays.com.”

The first indication of gender performance on Jake’s profile was through his joining two groups (A and B), “Supporting the Trevor Project,” which is an LGBTQ-oriented service and awareness group, and “(University) LGBT Office.” While both convey queer-alliance, “Supporting the Trevor Project” could be considered more esoteric than a general LGBT organization, specifically one in which the name speaks for itself. Joining “Supporting the Trevor Project” depicts a form of queer awareness and credibility that may not be as evident to the general public as becoming a part of an LGBT organization. Neither of these activities was met by response from Jake’s friends. Of particular note, however, is that Jake’s statement of queer alliance occurred before he made a specific declaration of his own sexual identity.

In November of 2007, Jake produced a status update that said, “Jake is ‘soooo gay....’” (C). A Facebook friend of Jake’s responded, “There’s no way your (sic) gay....noooo way....” (C-a). Jake’s initial post was in the style of overstatement and emphasis bearing irony. The user who responded did so in a way that validated Jake’s performance by reiterating Jake’s ironic – but not disruptive – tone. Jake and the respondent may have had a better idea of the real-life context of the status update and response, but the general viewer would have had to read into them and be left to guess. Jake’s presentation melds the Goffmanian personal and social aspects

that comprise identity and create copresence in the shared social space of Facebook, blurring the public and private. By using irony, Jake and the respondent undercut the homophobic insult of being gay.

Jake's next performance of gender is reiterative of his previous. Almost three months after the former status update, he updated, "Jake is gay" (D). At the basic interpretation, Jake was identifying himself sexually. Without any response to his update, it is difficult to determine exactly the tone or style Jake was attempting to perform. This lack of response declares the post ambiguous. His status update was matter-of-fact, but it posited his sexual identity, reciting his previously-stated preference, as well as his previous performance.

Sometime after, Jake changed his fixed category of "Interested In"/"Looking For" to "Men" (E). In response, four users "liked" the change, and one user responded, "LOVE this" (E-b). Jake's activity was transformational in Facebook terms. Whether or not others knew about Jake's real-life sexual identity, they responded positively to his Facebook "outing." Had users in Jake's network been aware of contextual identifiers, such as his participation in queer-related groups and his previous status updates, they may have been able to infer his sexual identity prior to his blatant declaration through the fixed category of "Looking For." Jake was providing mostly back-stage information on the front-stage by presenting his sexual preference, and the response of his Facebook friends affirmed his disclosure.

Shortly after Jake changed the fixed category of "Looking For," he changed another fixed category. He changed his relationship status from "Single" to "In a Relationship" (F). This was similarly met with positivity from Jake's Facebook friends when four users "liked" the change (F-a), once again affirming the presentation of back-stage information as front-stage performance.

Six months after Jake's relationship change, he updated the change by adding the name of the Facebook user with whom he was in the relationship: "Jake is in a relationship with (another male)" (G). Five users "liked" the update, and one user responded with "LOVE. =)" (G-b), while another with "like like like like like...don't you wish you could like something more than once?" (G-c). This change was received positively, further reinforcing the disclosure of such information.

Jake advanced his back-stage disclosure by updating specifically about the interactions between him and his boyfriend: "Jake got to see his awesome boyfriend for the first time in 3.5 weeks" (H). Jake uses the pronoun, "his," which typically signifies the male sex, but he pairs it with, "boyfriend," which disrupts the norm. This update was met by positive reinforcement when 10 users "liked" the post (H-a), further validating Jake's gender performance and presentation of backstage information. Users tended to comment more about Jake's own, personal relationships through status update commentary, rather than responding to Jake's performance of collective identity, such as joining groups or attending events. While this sort of attention to status updates tends to be the norm throughout Facebook interactions, it is important to note.

Even though Jake did not change the fixed categories of potential gender performance offered through the Facebook profile until almost three years after he had aligned himself with supporting queer initiatives, Jake opted to use status updates to perform his sexual identity during that time. Jake moved from a presence that required close-reading to determine his sexual identity to one that conveyed it readily. Jake was active in his self-presentation, combining front-stage performance with back-stage information.. He held a negotiated position by being present and proud, but not overly loud. His ironic status depicted a hybrid identity in its

subversion as well as its non-offensive conformity. Jake's presentation was typically received by his audience the way he intended it to be received. His "coming out" posts and gender performances were welcomed with support and commentary in accordance to the tones and symbols Jake was trying to present.

### ***Kate: A Name and a Relationship***

Kate used a typically-female name but did not list a sex category, list an "Interested In" category or participate in flexible gender performance by joining groups, attending events or posting status updates. Kate had 102 friends. Kate listed no originating location but displayed a small Midwestern city as current residence and posted attendance at a large Midwestern university. The researcher was able to load Kate's profile through Feb. 9, 2006.

Even though Kate did not perform gender by using either restrictive or flexible modes of expression, they went through a gender transformation by announcing involvement in a relationship with another Facebook user, whose user name can be considered typically female. This "Relationship Status" change occurred on March 28, 2011, at 8:09 p.m. Kate's relationship shift and relationship status were the only gender performances visible through Facebook identification.

While Kate did not list a sex category, a typical user would assume them to identify as female, due to their name. (While profile pictures were not included in this study, it can be noted that Kate's was a cat.) If a typical user was to operate on the assumption that Kate was a female, and that they (she) began a relationship with another user who most likely identified as female, the viewer could assume that Kate transformed from a female without a relationship to a female who was in a lesbian relationship. However, the lack of concretion speaks to Kate's marginalization and her negotiated position on Facebook, in which they (not necessarily "she")

doesn't want to be identified with a sex, prefers not to share such identification or identifies with a signifier not available on Facebook. Kate's lack of participation in some of Facebook's fixed categories – but not all – displays her acceptance of Facebook norms as well as her dismissal. Kate's choice to participate is a compromise for her—she wants to be a part of Facebook, but she can't do so without withholding a part of her suggested identity.

### ***Jenny: Big Meaning in Little Ways***

Similar to Kate, Jenny did not list a sex category, but their name is one that can be considered typically female. Jenny refrained from listing sex and “Interested In” categories on Facebook, but she used “her” in status updates. Jenny had 210 friends, did not list a previous or current residence but did list that they studied at a large Midwestern university. Jenny's profile was loaded through Feb. 26, 2010 at 2:59 p.m.

Jenny listed being married on Facebook. The name of the user she listed as being married to was sexually ambiguous. Jenny's profile indicated that she participated in three events and two status updates that conveyed gender performance. The events Jenny attended by performance included “LGBT Leadership Conference: Intersections of Leadership and Society,” “Come OUT for (a city)!” and “Human Rights Ordinance Reading.” Jenny's status updates and user responses included:

(A) Dec. 15, 2010 at 10:16 a.m.: “I love my wife!”

a. 12 people like this.

(B) Jan. 23, 2011 at 6:47 p.m.: “Jenny loves her wife. Loves her wife's soup. Loves watching movies with her wife. : )”

a. 13 people like this.

Jenny abstained from performing her gender through the restrictive or fixed categories provided by the structures of Facebook. However, her attendance at various queer-supportive events showcases her alliance with queer activism. A profile viewer would have to look closely to read into the lack of information presented through fixed categories.

However, Jenny's status updates demonstrate her manipulation of heteronormativity. By updating, "I love my wife!" (A), Jenny is not only declaring queer love, she's also subverting the heterosexual norm by using a dominantly heterosexual title ("wife"). She disidentifies with the legal context of marriage, specifically non-heterosexual marriage. Her performance was well-received by her audience (A-a), validating her profession of love. Jenny does this in a way that is rooted in context but does not parody. Her presentation seems to be genuine and sincere, and it is received similarly.

Jenny's latter status update (B) is a reiteration of her previous performance, with more elaboration and subversion. She more explicitly subverts norms, as they pertain to marriage and the context and construct of marriage. She loves *her* wife, loves *her* wife's soup and loves watching movies with *her* wife. Jenny uses the pronoun, "her," which typically signifies the female sex, but she pairs it with "wife," which disrupts the norm. Jenny chooses not to identify as "Female" via the Facebook category of "Sex," but she uses the word associated with female reference in the flexible form of Facebook status update. Jenny produces a declaration of functionality of a non-heterosexual marriage through this update. She conveys that not only is queer love present in her life, it's thriving, and it's normal enough that the little things – like eating soup and watching movies – matter in big ways.

Jenny's Facebook friends seem to respond in a similar fashion to Jenny's sincerity, validating her performance. Jenny balances back-stage and front-stage presentation, using



Facebook in a manner comparable to how one would communicate interpersonally. In her disidentificatory practice Jenny subverts and manipulates the binarized system of Facebook, but she does so by presenting that she's married, updating her status and joining groups.

The summary on an interview with Jenny provides more context.

### ***Peter: Heels and Flats***

Peter categorized himself as a male. He had 736 friends, listed his residence as a southern city and former residence as another southern city. He studied at a small public university in a southern city. Peter's profile could be loaded through Aug. 16, 2010.

Peter's profile listed him as being in a relationship and interested in men. Peter "went from being 'single' to 'in a relationship'" on Feb. 27 at 8:53 p.m., and 25 users "liked" the change. Peter's profile did not show him as involved in any groups, activities or events related to gender performance, but Peter portrayed gender performance in flexible means through three status updates. These included:

(A) Feb. 19, 2011 at 10:45 p.m.: "Dear boy, get out of my head. Kthnx."

a. 9 people like this.

(B) Feb. 25, 2011 at 12:30 p.m.: "I really *am* the worst gay man ever. Can't think of a place to buy new shoes, other than like Hibbets(?)" (emphasis in original)

a. 12 people like this.

b. User: "Heels or flats? :)"

(C) March 30, 2011 at 2:55 a.m.: "There are few things in life more comforting than going to sleep in your boyfriend's hoodie, and they are mostly edible, delicious, and wholly inappropriate to sleep with."

a. 5 people like this.

In Peter's first update (A), he produces a middle-region mesh of back-stage and front-stage performance through stylized language by creating a joke of a sentiment aimed for one, specific person by making it public. Peter plays coy through his generality, which may have correlation to his relationship status change that occurred eight days later. Peter's use of language that may be considered feminine or, at least, not masculine, such as "Kthnx," and the phrasing of writing a letter to a boy ("Dear boy") subvert the norm and showcase a performance that is a campy contrivance of a back-stage sentiment.

Peter's next update about finding shoes (B) conveys a hybrid identity, in which dramatization and parody accompany sincerity. Peter recycles a stereotype of gay men and shoes, exposing the artifice of dominant culture and disidentifying with dominant culture by declaring himself gay but not the perceivably typical type who knows about fashion. Among various affirmative responses to answer the literal question, one commenter queried, "Heels or flats? : )" playing along with Peter's jocularly and reinforcing his disidentificatory performance by elaborating on shoe types that – according to stereotypical perception – gay men should know all about.

In Peter's subsequent status update (C), he uses similar modes of expression but brings his sexuality even more to the front stage. He's brazen with his preferences, both conveying general queerness and pointing out personal quirk and fetish. Like Jenny, Peter showcases delight in normalcy (the comfort of a boyfriend's hoodie), but he problematizes the culturally-dominant norm by queering and personalizing it. Peter's activity on Facebook displays disidentification and performances that incite affirmation in his audience. Peter is not overtly political in that he does not rebel against Facebook's fixed categorizations. He maintains a

malleable queer identity because his dramatic, parodic and comedic status updates place him in opposition to his use of Facebook's fixed categorizations.

### ***Ann: Bi- the Book***

Ann's profile depicted that she was a female and that she had 284 friends. She did not disclose where she was from or where she resided at the time of the analysis, but she did list that she attended a large Midwestern university. The researcher loaded her profile through Jan. 30, 2006.

Ann listed that she was in a relationship with another Facebook user with a typically female-specific name. Ann listed that she was interested in men and women, and she had no gender transformation performance apparent on her profile but participated in three events and one group. The events Ann attended included, "Stop the Hate: Rally Against...(an) Anti-Gay Rally," "Queering American Literature" and "Pro-Ordinance Rally and Sign Contest." The group that Ann belonged to was "Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of GLBTIQ People in (Region)."

Ann chose perform her gender through Facebook categories and through flexible event attendance. Within the scope of the study, Ann was the only subject who chose to use the "Men and Women" option for the "Interested In" category, which is the only fixed option for using a signifier that disrupts the heterosexual / homosexual binary. Perhaps since Ann was listed as in a relationship, she did not feel that it was necessary to use status updates to perform her gender. However, she does succumb to the system of Facebook because she identifies as "Female" and fills in every fixed category. Ann kept the back-stage to herself, choosing not to blur the front-stage / back-stage lines.

### *Mark: Engaged Male*

Mark categorized himself as “male” and “engaged” on his Facebook profile. He had 216 friends, and he listed no former residence but displayed current residence in a small Midwestern city. Mark’s profile was loaded through April 18, 2006.

Even though Mark categorized himself as “male” and “engaged” to a user with a female name, he did not list a category for “Interested In.” His history did not disclose any transformative gender performance, but he attended one event – “(City) Pride Parade!” – and was involved in six groups, including “Equality (State),” “Project HEALTH: Harnessing Education, Advocacy & Leadership in Trans Health,” “(Regional) Human Rights Project,” “University LGBT Resource Center,” “Gay and Lesbian Review—Worldwide” and “The Trevor Project.”

Mark may have subverted Facebook categorizations and limitations of fixed and restrictive gender performance by performing his gender through more flexible modes. According to the Basic Information of his profile, Mark is seemingly quite normative—he identifies as “male” and is “engaged” to a user with a typically-female name. However, with attention to the message conveyed by his group involvement, he aligns himself with LGBT entities.

Mark’s subtle performance is one of subversion in a very basic but important way. He negotiates the categorizations of Facebook by countering the norm through his group involvement. Like Ann, Mark does not blur the lines of presentation by melding front- and back-stage performance. He retains on Facebook the common technique of interpersonal communication by keeping his back-stage information hidden.

The summary on an interview with Mark provides more context.

### *Kerry: Divorced and Reserved*

Kerry's profile displayed her identified sex category as female, though she did not list a response for "Interested In." Kerry had 354 friends and was from a metropolitan city in the south and resided in a small Midwestern city at the time of the analysis. She listed her attendance at a large Midwestern university.

Kerry's relationship status showed her as divorced, and her profile did not evidence gender transformation performance. Kerry participated in five events and four groups. The events that she performed participation in were, "Pride Parade," "Day of Silence," "Queering American Indian Literature," "Human Rights Ordinance Second Reading" and "LGBT & Friends Night." The groups Kerry belonged to included, "Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of GLBTIQ People in (Location)," (University) LGBT Resource Center," "Gay Marriage," and "Voices Against Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill."

It is of interest that Kerry displayed her relationship status as "divorced" but did not identify a category for "Interested In." Since Kerry did not identify the "Interested In" category, she presents herself as either not interested in anyone or any further relationship or unwilling to situate herself in such dynamics. By not performing through status updates, Kerry chooses to keep back-stage information back-stage; however, with inspection of groups and events, she subverts the norm with subtlety and silence.

Kerry's silence, and that of other users, demonstrates a sort of counter-identification, in which the subject rejects the limited categories of identification available. This notion of rejection – both felt by the subject and used by the subject to make a statement about her negotiated position – creates a performance of ambiguity. Kerry's existence is then ambiguous on Facebook, as a user without a complete identity.

### *Tessa: A Female in a Relationship*

Tessa listed herself as a female in a relationship with another Facebook user, whose name is typically female. Tessa had 561 friends and listed her prior residence as a small Midwestern city and current residence in another small Midwestern city. She listed attendance at a large Midwestern university.

Tessa did not display an “Interested In” response, and her profile did not allude to performance of gender transformation. Tessa participated in three events, including a “Stop the Hate” rally, “Human Rights Ordinance First Reading!” and “Queering American Indian Literature.” While her group and activity presentation situate her as queer-friendly, Tessa does not display personalized gender performance outside of her relationship status and female identification. Due to her participation in certain Facebook functions (identifying as “Female” and “In a Relationship”) and rejection of others, she sustains a negotiated position. By not performing in status updates, Tessa chooses to keep her back-stage information in the back stage, and she withholds from being a reflexive, acting subject who creates copresence within the shared social space of Facebook. Tessa does not manage other users’ impressions of her gender performance and keeps her public and private information separate. Tessa’s choice not to participate is as vital to her identity – though not as readily apparent – as another user’s choice to participate.

**Table 4.1 Hermeneutic Analysis Data**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex*</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Interested In</b>	<b>Transformative Activity</b>	<b>Gender Performance</b>
Don	Male	Not listed	Not listed	None**	None
Jake	Male	In a relationship	Men	Looking for: Men; In a Relationship	7 groups, 5 status updates
Kate	Not listed	In a relationship	Not listed	In a Relationship	None
Jenny	Not listed	Married	Not listed	None	4 events, 2 status updates
Peter	Male	In a relationship	Men	None	3 status updates
Ann	Female	In a relationship	Men and Women	None	1 group, 3 events
Mark	Male	Engaged	Not listed	None	6 groups, 1 event
Kerry	Female	Divorced	Not listed	None	4 groups, 5 events
Jack	Male	Not listed	Not listed	None	None
Tessa	Female	In a relationship	Not listed	None	3 events

\* “Sex” is the category featured on Facebook profiles.

\*\* Don had communicated with the researcher and indicated he had come out on Facebook but did not think the record was available

## Interview Findings and Analysis

### *Mark: Engaged Male*

The hermeneutic analysis of Mark's profile led to questions of his awareness and perceptions of the tailoring of his information to present specific gender performance. Mark listed himself as "Male" and engaged to another user with a typically female-specific name. Mark agreed to an anonymous interview that was audio recorded and conducted in private. This occurred on May 4, 2011, at 11:30 a.m. and lasted approximately one hour.

Upon viewing Mark's profile, he said that it was a fairly good surface representation of who he is. He mentioned that he identifies as transgender, so he decided that he would intentionally choose "Male" as opposed to not choosing either gender category available. He said he did this because he felt like "Male" fits with his gender presentation. Mark said, "Not choosing either (category) is different from choosing gender-neutral because I'm not gender-neutral. Choosing male is the most accurate for me because (Facebook doesn't) have a transgender option." Mark is already compromising his gender performance, due to the basic limitations of Facebook. He continued by saying, "I think that what ends up happening – because I'm engaged and the person that I'm engaged to is a woman – is I look straight on Facebook." Mark laughed and said, "Which is weird; which is very odd for me. I don't really think of myself in that way but then I look at myself on Facebook and think, 'Wow, I look really normative.'" Mark chooses to participate on Facebook with an identity that is not ideally representative.

Mark said that his participation in LGBTQ-supported groups and activities undermines the "straightness" of his profile in some ways but that an unknowing observer would perhaps not realize that dynamic. Mark said that the people with whom he's friends on Facebook are friends



he knows in real life. He doesn't have to fill in blanks that Facebook doesn't allow because real-life does it for him. Mark said that he doesn't feel like his profile "comes out" to his Facebook friends because they are real people who already know him. This translates to his involvement in groups and activities presented on Facebook. Again, it seems that Mark is compromising his presentation on Facebook because it is immersed in real-life context. Mark makes accommodations for his interpersonal status online, rather than extending it.

Mark is involved in various groups and activities that meet and organize in real life, along with planning their meetings on Facebook. For the most part, the users that attend similar events as Mark know him as transgender, and they know where his ideals align. He said that the people he sees more in real life are the same ones with whom he has interactions on Facebook. Mark says that he doesn't often present status updates or link much on his own accord because his friends are posting and linking similar news stories and goings-on. Mark says, "I guess I'm more intentionally quiet on my own page, but I'll comment on everyone else's pages." He claims to be aware of who comprises his audience on Facebook and doesn't need to be redundant with posts and status updates. His intentional silence is a refraining from using supplemental performance for an already-informed audience. What "is" and what others ought to see as "is" on Facebook is mostly content that is missing because it is rooted in real-life context, established outside of the realms of Facebook.

Mark has said that his language and text he uses on Facebook does not present either hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity, but that it's something in between: "I think I go back and forth. I think online, I'm more apt to be read as having a feminized text in some ways – in terms of using exclamation points or smileys or that kind of garbage, but that all does signify gender codes in some ways." This back-and-forth style of interaction evidences an unfixed identity that

problematizes Facebook's strictures. These choices and awarenesses are not easily identifiable simply by glancing at Mark's profile page. He declared that he actively considered which gender he would pick for his profile's "Sex" category. Mark continued:

I don't know whether or not at some point I used to have an "Interested In" category, but I don't now. I think part of that is because I'm in a relationship. But if I had to say who I was interested in now, I'm not sure who I would say I was interested in. In essence, by not identifying that category, it ends up making me look more straight because I'm pretty sure I wouldn't just say that I was interested in women only, but that just seems like it makes things super complicated in some ways to say that I'm interested in men and women, so I haven't really dealt with it.

Mark's reluctance to "deal with it" may have more to do with the lack of options on Facebook's for performing gender. This choice may also be related to Mark being in a relationship and his assumed satisfaction with it and the fact that his real-life friends comprise most of his Facebook network. Mark has not felt disruption in not presenting a gender on Facebook, and he has not had to use impression management to invalidate discrepancies in either realm, but Mark doesn't buy into Facebook as an outlet for his gender performance, but he said that much of Facebook is gendered.

Mark said that he has friends with both "real" profiles and drag profiles, but that he has more female-bodied friends than male-bodied friends (as evidenced through profile pictures and other pictures). Mark said that he even feels the "implicit pressure to fit in on Facebook by 'correctly' performing gender." He said that he doesn't "like" or comment about sports very often, even though he follows the Steelers religiously, because "keeping tabs on professional sports is often coded as an activity for men." Such implicit pressures to "correctly" perform

binarized gender are reflective of interpersonal communication and real-life pressures to do so. Mark said that relationships in real life and on Facebook, however, can prove difficult to manage if the perceived gender performances are discrepant, but this is a rare experience for him.

Mark is self-consciously performing gender through silence. He understands the consequences of his actions in accordance to what is expected behavior and presentation, so he sacrifices complete disapproval by managing the impressions of others through his lack of participation. Mark is not overtly reflexive in that he does not readily present himself in a way to incite feedback from an audience, but he is an acting, responsive subject through his inaction. Mark does not participate on Facebook in a way that blends the public and private space. His silence is telling, but it does not establish copresence or parallelism of shared space. In Mark's experience, there is no room for queering identity on Facebook.

### ***“Jenny Loves Her Wife”***

After analyzing the text available on Jenny's Facebook profile, it was apparent that she had made purposeful decisions to include or not include aspects of gender performance. She did not list herself as “Female,” but she used the pronoun, “her,” in her status updates. Jenny also refrained from identifying an “Interested In” category, but her relationship status changed from being engaged to being married. The sex of the individual to whom Jenny was married was ambiguous through fixed categories on her profile, but Jenny used the word, “wife,” to signify a female. The interview with Jenny was conducted on May 5, 2011, at 5:08 p.m. and lasted approximately one hour. Jenny agreed to meet in a private location and have the interview audio recorded.

After Jenny was presented with an outsider's view of her Facebook profile and wall, she said that she felt like it would give anyone looking at it a good representation of who she was but

that, “I feel like I can be myself on my ‘new’ profile.” Jenny described that she had created a new profile after she had ended her relationship with a male. This came after she questioned her sexuality. Her initial, “straight” profile was searchable under a name analogous to “Jenny Smith.” She ceased interaction on her Jenny Smith profile and created a profile using her middle name as her last name, or a name analogous to “Jenny Taylor.” Jenny’s middle name could have been perceived as a last name.

Jenny explained the switch in profiles and switch in names:

So before, I was actually in a relationship with another guy. That was the most drastic change (between the Jenny Smith and Jenny Taylor profiles). But I never identified in terms of gender or sexual orientation on Facebook just because – I don’t know – it just made me uncomfortable that that was the permanent profile, so that was never something that I included.

Whereas Jenny’s Facebook relationship status changed on Facebook, it seems that she had been uncomfortable with identifying with a set gender or sexual orientation in real life. This discomfort manifested in her lack of presentation of “Sex.”

The conversation eased into issues of personal preference of privacy and protection on Facebook, and Jenny said that she tried to make a new Facebook account using her first and last names but that it was too accessible to people she didn’t want to have access to it. Jenny manipulated structural settings, such as her name and her privacy settings, and she chose to omit information for personal security and identity and gender identity ambiguity. Jenny admitted to feeling that her negotiations on Facebook served as a “flimsy disguise” for her “(Jenny Taylor) phase,” but her reasoning for creating the middle name profile was to prevent access from “everyone (she) went to high school with and (her) family.” She said that most of her family is

not receptive of her and her wife being together at all. Among other factors, this could be a result of the social environment of her hometown.

Jenny said that since she's from a small town in the Midwest and since people from that town were her friends on Facebook, her parents would have found out about her relationship with her wife before she had wanted to tell them. She said, "Then they would never feel like they could brag about what they would see as my assumed return to heterosexuality after this 'phase' wears out or whatever it is they imagine is going on." Jenny said that with the creation of her middle name profile, she was trying to prevent the spread of gossip to her parents, and she was "trying to put some static in there." Jenny chose to present herself carefully on Facebook in a manner more aware of front-stage settings but withheld information and altered it so that there was no access to her backstage. Similarly, Jenny withheld private information that many "typical" users disclose in the public space.

When Jenny created her middle name profile, she said that she used a picture of her with her wife but that it could have been interpreted ambiguously: "If someone knew that we were together, it was pretty obvious that we were close, but someone could have thought, 'They're BFFs.'" For comparison, Jenny proceeded to log on to her seemingly "straight" Jenny Smith account.

She said it was a matter of "muscle memory" in logging onto her old account, and then she outlined the differences between her profiles. Her Jenny Smith profile picture was one of her and her mother, and pictures of Jenny and her ex-boyfriend were on the profile. She said that she had listed her high school – her high school is not listed on her new profile – and that she "had some quotes (listed), trying to make myself sound smart," but that her friend network and pictures were very different from her new profile.

Jenny said that there was a notion of becoming – with a connection between what she typed as her profile and presented identity on Facebook and her real-life identity – or adhering to a recitation of her profile when she created her middle name profile. Jenny said:

It's amazing how big of a role Facebook plays in (real life) social relationships, too, because I felt like I was missing out on a whole lot – like people talking about things and referencing things from Facebook – so I felt like I was really removed from that community in a way that felt not normal. I felt like (by creating Jenny Taylor, I was) kind of trying to be normal but with this new identity factor – or this new publicly-displayed identity factor.

It seems that, to Jenny, Facebook identity and real-life identity are fluid and related; they are both necessary for maintaining social relationships. Unlike real-life, however, Jenny created a new profile and attempted to start a new identity within the confines of the structures of Facebook. For Jenny, identity is never fixed but always fluid and fragmented. Jenny's compromise of trying to be normal and the pressures involved with that compromise are telling of the importance of Facebook to her in retaining real-life, interpersonal communications and relationships.

After Jenny created the Jenny Taylor profile, she eventually changed the name on the profile to her real first and last name, Jenny Smith. Jenny said this happened right around the time that she told her parents that she and her wife – or girlfriend at the time – were not just roommates but were in a relationship together. Jenny said, “So I feel like changing the last name back (from my first and middle name to my first and last name) was the official, ‘Now I’m Jenny Smith.’ The middle name account was maybe testing it a little bit and then solidifying it with the switch back (to my real first and last name).” Jenny is fully aware of the repercussions of

Facebook navigations and their ties to real-life interactions and interpersonal dynamics. Her choice to wait to change the user name of her middle name profile page until after she had confronted her parents displays the seriousness and awareness with which Jenny handles her Facebook presence. For her, the public and private are closely related, but they don't bleed into a middle region.

Jenny said that she feels that Facebook users in general are very selective about what they choose to present, both seemingly minute items as well as more impactful ones. She said this translates to her choice not to list a "Sex" category:

I never felt comfortable defining ("Sex") on Facebook. I guess it was 2005 when I first got on Facebook, and, even then, that binarized identity category felt really rigid and not real. And I guess, after posting (my relationship with my wife), it feels – obviously, I'm married to a woman, so you would assumedly consider that a lesbian relationship, and it is – like I would not identify as lesbian, and I wouldn't identify as straight, and I don't feel comfortable identifying as bisexual. It's just very, very restrictive. I feel like putting my "Sex" on (Facebook) would reinforce those kinds of identity categories that just don't feel right.

Jenny articulates the feelings associated with impression management and the constrictive nature of assuming a specific identity. She would not feel like herself if she had to conform to a label of identity. Unlike the sacrifice of participating, the sacrifice of conforming to unsatisfactory identity categorizations is not worth it to Jenny.

When prompted to respond to her status updates that convey gender performance, Jenny said that she typically posts them without thinking too critically about them and updates because she feels a certain way in a certain moment. She concedes that presenting fixed gender identity

categories on one's profile may be a useful tool for defining and searching for specific types of people, but she feels that the structures are too rigid and confining for her preferred presentation. As in Mark's case, Jenny decides to withhold from participating or identifying in a certain way and instead speaks more with her lack of gender performance.

Jenny said that even if Facebook had more identity categories available and more fluid identity categories available for a user to represent him or herself with, she would not feel comfortable choosing a static representation of her gender identity: "That would never be something I would click."

Jenny's choice not to provide certain information on Facebook is testament to her position as a troubled, marginalized subject. Jenny resists gender performance on Facebook because she resists it in real life. She uses Facebook as a supplement to her real-life interactions, limiting her friend network and withholding categorized information because she prefers the more contextually-rife interpersonal interactions and the freedom to identify – or *not* identify – than the stiff, framed communications available to her on Facebook. Her deliberate lack of participation – her disidentification – resists identity constructs and confines and calls for change both online and off.



# **Chapter 5 - Discussion, Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

## **Summary and Discussion**

This study attempted to reveal the human experience of the connection to the machine. More specifically, it took into account the possibilities of identity fragmentation and self-discovery in the simulation of the real and of the self by considering real-life and online identity and gender identity through the application of theoretical framework of Erving Goffman and queer theories. Even though little previous research existed to represent the rarely-represented queer population on social network sites, this study attempted to provide marginalized and othered queer individuals with attention to their particular computer-mediated experiences. Hermeneutic analysis and depth interviews provided results leading to the conclusion that the mirror of the machine does not provide a shared, free space in which queer users can readily and openly communicate but that it simply reflects a mirage of real-life, interpersonal communication. While it provides control within its own confines for the presentation of gender performance and identity, it is ultimately heteronormative. Queer users mute performances of gender in order to participate online in a way that supplements their real-life relationships. They maintain their marginalized status, and their silence is only meaningful to those who see beyond it.

This study has attempted to answer the following two research questions: how are gender and sexuality articulated on the Facebook profiles of queer individuals; and how do queer individuals present the performance of a gender transformation on their Facebook profiles? As the information indicated, absolute consistency among participants' gender performances is

lacking. Each case of queer presentation and gender performance can be examined on its own and as it is positioned in relation to dynamic structures.

Some subjects involved in the hermeneutic analysis did not present aspects of gender performance in either frequency or depth. These subjects portrayed a consistent presentation of front-stage behavior without dynamism or frames upon which to base conclusions. This proved problematic because only speculation could be reached. Socio-cultural and environmental influences could have been factors in influencing a lack of performance. A lack of knowledge concerning privacy settings and archiving habits left the researcher without a basis for comparison of each subject's norms in interactivity on Facebook. For some users, the presumption can be made that Facebook appears to channel users' presentations into limitations and restrictions evident in interpersonal communication. Most subjects held negotiated positions in their Facebook use, maintaining the marginalized and liminal status they face in real life. Even the subjects who readily disidentify and have the hope that Facebook and SNSs like it would provide alternate avenues for minorities to feel freer to engage in queer self-presentation do so within the routines and structures of Facebook. Their silence speaks to the need for change online and in real life.

As Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) stated, "We expect less from our neighbors and expect them to expect less of us" (p. 331), and as Sherry Turkle's (2011) subtitle conveys, "We expect more from technology and less from each other." Those who present disidentificatory performances – particularly Jenny, Mark and Peter – raise questions of how technology influences the human experience. In these instances, the machine reflects the gender identity the subjects emit but it does not challenge their status as minority subject or that of the marginalized others.

A successful emergence from the margins could be read in Jenny's and Mark's self-presentations. Jenny and Mark both displayed middle regions through self-presentation on Facebook. Jenny subverted the available Facebook structures by opting not to use the fixed categories of gender performance but instead to use flexible modes of expression, such as status updates and event attendance. Mark performed similarly, though his subversion was not as readily apparent – one had to examine his groups and interests in order to come to the assumption that he was not representing himself as a straight male engaged to a female.

The interview findings indicated that Jenny and Mark were very aware of Facebook's heteronormative structures available to them for self-presentation on the SNS. Mark said that he would choose to categorize himself as "Transgender Male" if given the option, but he would refrain from choosing an option for "Interested In." Mark would rather not categorize or objectify the individuals with whom he is interested in. Jenny reacted similarly, though, in addition to not categorizing "Interested In," she would not categorize her own gender identity. These choices give testament to the inadequacy of SNSs and the extension of socially prescriptive patterns of identification.

## **Conclusions**

Critical cyberculture scholars have attested to the revolutionary potential for identity construction and negotiation online and its effects in society. While this may not be disproven yet, the real-life Don, Jake, Kate, Jenny, Peter, Ann, Mark, Kerry, Jack, Tessa and anyone who relates to their experiences online may still be subject to and, in turn, reinforcing social issues of queer marginalization, including the sustenance of the heterosexual matrix.

Queer subjects – already positioned socially as enduring and negotiating liminality and border-crossing – may or may not experience through SNSs what many envisioned as a

liberating technological development for queer communication. This study has shown that, through careful manipulation, marginalized subjects can present their middle regions to their satisfactions, though these are met within the strictures of a binarized environment. Even if subjects execute premeditation and consideration of careful details prior to attempted self-presentation, their efforts to participate as freely as possible will be subverted by the heteronormative structures of Facebook.

Due to the binarized and categorical technological structures of Facebook, in participating, the queer users submit themselves to marginalization. Their oppressed identities do not conform to the rules that govern heterosexuality. Since these rules rely on continual enactment and citation by subjects, subjects can be endangered by others' alternate perceptions of gender or discrepancies between real-life performance and online performance.

Mark's and Jenny's preferences of indeterminate sexual attraction and interest reveal a want that exceeds the contemporary capacity of both online and offline norms. Mark and Jenny controlled their gender performances primarily through not saying anything, rather than saying something on Facebook. Their silence conveys the need for changes and new possibilities within Facebook and other online mechanisms. If the marginalized call for identity security continues to exist, even as individuals come out or present gender transformation, they are already restricted to existing constructs of gender and identity and continue to be within online and offline heteronormativity.

## **Limitations**

Facebook itself poses structures and routines that could create limitations. The tendency of real-life friendships to lay the groundwork for online social networks could pose limitations due to the inescapability of societal demand for online and offline consistency in presentation.

Additionally, Facebook allows users to edit their profiles, which may have allowed subjects to delete comments and activity.

Another limitation could have been the geographic community of the subjects of the study. While not all subjects were connected to the researcher online through the network of a large Midwestern university, most were. Conservative views are prevalent in the community surrounding this university, though they may not be predominant within the university community itself.

The small sample size only depicts a portion of the queer community on Facebook. It is by no means extensively representative, which poses a drawback.

While textual analysis and hermeneutics offer perspective of positionality and dynamic and historical context, the method of analysis may raise questions about the validity of the approach. The close reading of a text may echo the perspective of the researcher. Similarly, while the context of the text is attempted to be identified, the text is the focus of analysis, which could be taken as self-contained and neglectful of the importance of the construction of meaning by the producer and reader. Others' comments and interactions could have been taken into account in analyzing the entirety of impression management as it pertains to an exclusive event. The emphasis on "restrictive" and "flexible" gender performances also proves problematic, especially in consideration of Facebook groups and events. The user who makes the presentation of specific views and ideologies may not actually believe in them or attend an event or belong to an active group.

The use of depth interviews also provides limited opportunity for interpretation by the researcher because recalling an experience in an interview does not necessarily replicate the experience or provide insight into the motivations or intentions of the subjects involved.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Pairing textual analysis with methods, aside from depth interviews, that explore institutional constraints on production of texts, such ethnography, focus group research or participant observation, may provide more validity to a similar study. The notion that Facebook is structurally heteronormative could lead to further research endeavors in SNS operations and programming and mirrored studies on other social network sites, including those requiring gender categories for registration and those without.

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