

**Look at us: Collective Narcissism in College Student Facebook Photo Galleries**

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## **Look at us: Collective narcissism in College Student Facebook Photo Galleries**

In recent years the popularity of social network sites (SNSs), such as Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, has expanded, enabling a culture of remote connectivity for young adults maintaining a variety of social ties to primary and secondary groups of contact. This is especially true for college-age adults who use SNSs to stay connected with friends and family dispersed across remote or nearby locations. These networked platforms of socially oriented activity permit an introduction of the self via public displays of connection (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002a&b; 2009). A subsequent networked presentation of the self involves performative elements, using a variety of tools and strategies to present tastes, likes, dislikes, affiliations, and in general, personality. Such a performative palette on sites like Facebook might include listings of interests and favorite music, films, and books, linking to groups sharing points of view or interests, posting of comments and responses, and, relevant to this paper, posting and labeling of photographs of one's self and one's friends. The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of photo galleries as an instrument of self presentation and a means of visual autobiography online.

Photographs have long served a significant function of preserving biographical memories. Albums of photographs -- from tintype and cabinet card albums in the mid and late 1800s to digital galleries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century -- are used to tell and retell experiences shared by members of one's family and by one's wider social circle. These photographs serve as mnemonic devices for the moments that bond us together, sparking larger conversations within

families (Chalfen, 1987). Further, they allows us, as Barthes (1981) suggests, to search through the past and rediscover the truth of our loved ones. Similarly, the manner in which college students portray themselves and tag others through photographs on Facebook is a contemporary means of introducing the self and performing one's identity. How do the photos selected, presented, and tagged help reify this mediated performance? If photos are taken for the purpose of being displayed and tagged, does this render the experiences and the social relationships presented more real? College students consciously upload and tag displayed photographs, thus selecting certain subjects and events to emphasize. Inspired by Chalfen's (1987) examination of "how we construct, manipulate, interpret, live with, participate in, and generally use visual symbolic forms" (p. 5), we examine how visual imagery is employed to present the self and everyday college life via Facebook photo galleries. In this study, we interrogate the photographs college students present of themselves as important forms of symbolic creation of their worlds.

#### Self-presentation and Social Network Sites (SNSs)

In everyday life, people consciously and unconsciously work to define the way they are perceived, hoping to engender positive impressions of themselves. This effort entails emphasizing certain characteristics, through dress, hairstyle, behavior and/or speech, while hiding or diminishing other characteristics perceived as flawed, depending on context. Goffman (1959) uses the term "performance" to refer to "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 15). Contemporary scholars from a variety of disciplines argue that identity is performed, in its many

iterations, in contexts that are both virtual and real, mediated or not, offline or online (Buckingham, 2008; Butler, 1990; Turkle, 1996).

Research on self-presentation has moved from examining interpersonal interactions, to displays through mass media (Mendelson, 2007; Meyrowitz, 1985) to more recent forms of new media in which elements of interpersonal and mass communications are merge, like personal homepages and blogs (Dominick, 1999, Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b, Walker, 2000). New media, such as the World Wide Web, allow people the opportunity to present various forms of themselves to others at a distance. People are able to post only that information which presents a desired image. While people are purportedly presenting themselves, they are presenting a highly selective version of themselves. Social network sites (SNSs) present the latest networked platform enabling self presentation to a variety of interconnected audiences. boyd and Ellison argue (2007), “SNSs constitute an important research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance” (p. 10). Indeed, SNSs afford a variety of tools that potentially extend and compromise impression management. In some cases, people create multiple versions of Facebook or MySpace pages for different audiences (not unlike how we present different versions of ourselves in face-to-face contexts); one for peers and one for parents.

Social network sites connect networks of individuals that may or may not share a place-based connection. SNSs support varying types of interaction on diverse and differing platforms. Some of the popular SNSs include MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, LinkedIn, and Bebo, among others, in terms of millions of users attracted, but also in terms of public attention and scholarship focus. Even though most SNSs are structured around a profile and a display of connections or friends, they may vary to the extent that they support additional services such as

blogging (e.g., LiveJournal), audio/visual content sharing (Flickr, Last.FM, YouTube), professional orientation (LinkedIn), focus on status updates online and mobile connectivity (Twitter, Dodgeball), exclusive membership (ASmallWorld), or specific ethnic, religious, sexual orientation and/or particular content genres (Orkut, CyWorld). Donath & boyd (2004) define SNSs as “on-line environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections. Participants in social network sites are usually identified by their real names and often include photographs; their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their self-presentation” (p. 72).

People use SNSs to present aspects of themselves to their network. These expressions can simultaneously express uniqueness and connection to others. These sites are about establishing, presenting and negotiating identity, through the tastes and interests expressed (Liu, 2007), those who we friend and highlight (Donath and boyd, 2004), through the applications we add to our SNS pages, and through the pictures of us and our friends (boyd, 2004, Donath, 2007). In addition, these identity presentations are supported by comments from other users.

SNSs are most often used to connect with individuals people know from offline environments, rather than for meeting new people online, differentiating SNSs from online dating sites (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The number of people linked to on SNSs is generally larger than those would communicate with on a regular basis and certainly beyond those who would see one’s personal photo albums (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath, 2007). Little of the research into SNSs has examined the posted photographs beyond acknowledging them as elements of self-presentation. Still, photos play a large role in

how identity is presented (Dominick, 1999). According to one study of teen use of social network sites, including Facebook, most users do post photos of themselves and their friends (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), with this activity being more popular with girls than boys. Facebook's published statistics, at present, report over 250 million active users and more than 1 billion photos uploaded every month (Facebook Press Room, Statistics, 2009). The photographs on a Facebook pages present a series of performances strategically chosen by an individual. The photographic life of young adults, including college students, is not much understood, and relevant research is presented in the following section. Thus, Facebook presents a useful case study into how college students construct their lives through photographs.

#### Personal Photography

Personal photographs are photographs made by ourselves, members of our family or peer group for our own use, not by professional photographers and not for mass audiences (Chalfen, 1981; Slater, 1995). These images are part of a larger social practice which Chalfen (1987) refers to this as the "Kodak culture," "whatever it is that one has to learn, know, or do in order to participate appropriately in what has been outlined as the home mode of pictorial communication" (p. 10).

While we think of personal photographs as rather haphazard, Chalfen (1987) and Musello (1980) argue that they are highly ritualized and conventionalized, with a rather limited range of subjects and events being recorded. While there is theoretically an unlimited range of subjects to document, cultural practice dictates a rather more limited set of subjects and moments. Personal photographs present ideals, emphasizing how we wish our lives to be remembered (Holland, 1997). The positive is always recorded over the negative, with moments

of celebration emphasized (King, 1986; Slater, 1995), especially those associated with lifetime milestones: birthdays, holidays, weddings. As Holland (1991) argues, these private pictures are entangled within and influenced by larger cultural stories about community, family and gender. Personal photographs reaffirm “culturally structured values” (Chalfen, 1987, p. 98), through what is shown (Orhn, 1975).

Relationships are also key aspects of personal photography, demonstrating important bonds between family and friends. There is an evidentiary purpose to personal photographs, providing proof of experiences and relationships for ourselves and for others (Barthes, 1981; Jacobs, 1981). These moments and the relationships become sanctified through their documentation. They are deemed worthy of recording and preserving. Digital photography has expanded the range of subjects deemed photoworthy, with more emphasis on the everyday and banal (Okabe & Ito, 2003; Murray, 2008). Holland (1997) suggests that “Pictures of leisure activities increasingly include the carnivalesque – cross-dressing for the last-night party, sidling up to the Greek waiter, the club outing when everyone was impossibly drunk, the risqué nude image” (p. 137).

There is normally a strong interaction between subject and photographer in personal photographs. The photographer is most often known intimately by the subject, and both share an interest in making photographs that emphasize how people would like to be seen. Further, personal photography is a social activity, where people actively pose for each other. Holland (1991) argues that: “Recording an event has become part of that event – and perhaps the most important part; for” (p. 2; see also Boerdam & Martinius, 1980). Most subjects pose directly before the lens, looking straight ahead, highly aware of being photographed. The photographer

holds the camera at eye level, emphasizing the normalness of the viewpoint (Jacobs, 1981). While the technology of personal photography allows pictures to be made with the subject unaware, this seldom occurs (Holland, 1991).

We therefore consciously and unconsciously transform ourselves before the camera, portraying a version of ourselves we hope to be (Barthes, 1981; Jacobs, 1981; Slater, 1995). Boerdam & Martinius (1980) also draw on Goffman: "People give a 'performance' when they allow themselves to be photographed, in the sense that they make allowance for a public that will ultimately see the photograph" (p. 109).

The presentation of personal photos is also highly ritualized. The social process dictates not only how these photos are made, but also to whom they are shown. These are not meant for mass audiences. They are meant for people who were known "personally" to the subjects in the images (Chalfen, 1987; King, 1986). The photos are produced for and consumed by those subjects and photographers and slightly larger circle of friends and relatives. Chalfen states that: "Ordered collections of home mode imagery are repeatedly telling the same 'stories' according to some master scenario-stories based on the pictorial rendering and unfolding of an interpretation of experienced daily life and the 'punctuation' of special experiences" (p. 142). These collections "deliver culturally significant tales and myths about ourselves to ourselves" (p. 142).

Most people's photographs are edited depending on the viewing audience. Some images are displayed at work, some in frames in the home, some in albums, and still others are kept for personal viewing only or destroyed. Personal photo albums are generally organized chronologically from oldest to newest, as well as around specific events (Miller & Edwards,

2007). Albums are not structured around a narrative. As Chalfen (1987) suggests: “The narrative remains in the heads of the picturemakers and on-camera participants for verbal telling and re-telling during exhibition events” (p. 70; see also Holland, 1991).

The production and presentation of personal photographs connects with Carey’s (1975) notion of the ritual view of communication: “In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith” (p. 6). These types of photos help build and sustain social groups by communicating shared values and stories. These images play an important role in perpetuating memories for a group, calling up moments for reflection and reminiscence. They are the visual myths, capturing the best moments to be told and retold, or as Sturken (1999) says, photos are “an artifact[s] used to conjure memory, nostalgia, and contemplation.” (p. 178; see also Hirsch, 1999).

Little research has examined the photographic worlds from the early adulthood time of life after high school graduation. This is certainly because the albums Chalfen examined were controlled by parents and not the young adults themselves. Tinkler’s (2008) overview of research on young people’s photographic practices echoes this. She suggests “Until recently, however, most children had little say over how they were represented in amateur, commercial or institutional photographs” (p. 258). She goes on to argue: “Today, young people from across the social-class spectrum have a wider range of opportunities for photographic self representation due to the availability of cheap ...cameras” (p. 258). Digital technology has placed cameras and photographs in the hands of almost all. And Facebook, Flickr, Snapfish and other sites allow for sharing of photographs easily with others.

In networked environments that blend private and public boundaries, like social network sites, personal photographs can traverse a multiplicity of audiences, to which these photographic narratives are of variable coherence and relevance. Yet, since they all emanate from the ego-centered basis of social network site like Facebook, they inadvertently communicate content of a performative nature to a variety of audiences. In order to better understand the worlds and accompanying narratives college students visually construct for themselves, our analysis is guided by the following general thematic questions: What kinds of visual narratives do college students construct through the display of photo galleries on Facebook? What are the defining elements of the visual rhetoric presented by Facebook photo galleries? Finally, what sense of self is presented via the visual storytelling media of Facebook? By examining visual depictions of behaviors broadcast to a simultaneity of public and private audiences, we hope to better understand the nature of identities that are performed on online spaces on the basis of experiences lived offline.

#### Method

We chose to analyze college students' photos qualitatively using methods based in visual anthropology and semiotics in order to capture the richness of the images, in addition to the more subtle aspects of the presentations. This qualitative analysis was guided primarily by Chalfen's (1987) "event-component framework" for analyzing home mode forms of communication. This framework contains two axes — events and components — each made up of five elements. The events Chalfen details are: *Planning* — "any action(s) in which there is a formal or informal decision regarding the production of a photographic image(s)" (p. 20); *Shooting: on-camera* — "any action(s) that in some way structures the person(s) or thing(s) that

“happens” in front of the operating camera” (p. 21-22); *Shooting: behind camera* – “any action(s) not in front of the camera by which in some way still structures the use and operation of it” (p. 22); *Editing* – “any action(s) which transforms, accumulates, eliminates, arranges or rearranges images” (pg. 23); and *Exhibition* – “any action(s) which occurs after shooting, in which photographic...imagery is shown and viewed in a public context” (p. 25). We adopted Chalfen’s accompanying definition of public as “any audience that consists of more than the picture-taker or editor” (p. 25). We focused on the last event, the exhibition, in our analysis of photo albums as presented through Facebook. We also employed his five components of home mode imagery, as a guide for our analysis: *Participants* – this concerns “identifying people who take pictures, appear in pictures, and look at pictures” (p. 27); *Topic* “describes image content in terms of the subject matter, activities, events, and themes that are presented in pictures” (p. 29); *Setting* “refers to when and where a particular communication event takes place” (p. 30); *Message form* – “the physical form, ‘shape’ or kind of picture” (p. 31); and *Code* “includes the characteristics that define a particular message form or ‘style; of image construction and composition,” focusing on the conventions that define the nature of the photographic images (p. 32). In addition, Chalfen suggests that the visual alone is not enough to understand how these forms of communication are used. Scholars must also examine verbal information included with the images, such as captions or titles. To this end, we examined visual identifications of photographed subjects or ‘tags,’ and commentary accompanying all photographs.

In addition to Chalfen’s framework, this analysis was informed by semiotic analysis, which attempted to qualitatively place content in a larger cultural context of meaning, looking

for recurring patterns of presences and absence (Hall, 1975; Rose, 2001). The choice of one subject over another frames our understanding of an event. Thus, it is also necessary to consider what was not chosen for inclusion in the photographs (Fiske 1990; Szarkowski 1966; Trachtenberg 1989; van Leeuwen 2001). Choices of what to include are only one aspect; we must also examine how the different choices are combined. Meaning is created by the relationships among the present signs (Fiske 1990). The entire body of work must be examined to ascertain these patterns of representation. While people are theoretically free to record and post pictures of anything, there are limitations based on these norms or conventions of what is acceptable or reasonable. Based on Chalfen, we examined the Participants, Topics, Setting, Form, Code (aesthetics), as reveal through the photos exhibited when clicking on the profile link, "See Photos of".

Participants in an online survey on Facebook uses (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008) were contacted by a graduate assistant for the purpose of accessing their photos. The participants were informed that their photos would be kept confidential. All photos of those agreeing to participate in this portion of the study were collected by producing portable document files of their photo pages. For this study, we examined the "photos of" each person to get a sense of how college students are portrayed by themselves and their friends through the processes of posting and tagging photographs. This examination did not focus on specifically on the albums each person posted, but on the overall collection of photos featuring the person whose pages we were examining. Currently, the architecture of Facebook groups all tagged photos of a person together, regardless of whether they are posted by the subject or by others. When a subject's Facebook page opens, there is a link under their profile photo which

says, "View Photos of me," containing all the images we analyzed. Based on the above method, the lead author examined every photograph found when clicking on the "Photos of" from the student's Facebook homepage and every comment posted about the photos, producing a total  $N = 20,962$  photos examined, and  $N = 13,543$  comments analyzed.

### Analysis

Before going further into the qualitative analysis, we begin with some descriptive results from the close-ended survey of college students ( $n = 333$ ) from which this sample was drawn in order to provide a descriptive sense of the popularity of photo posting and tagging. Women reported having more photos on their pages (4.36 vs. 3.48, on a 1 to 5 scale;  $F(1) = 38.18, p = .000$ ), being more likely to post photos (3.22 vs. 2.51;  $F(1) = 47.26, p = .000$ ), and more likely to tag photos than men (3.02 vs. 2.5;  $F(1) = 20.6, p = .000$ ). Further, the size of one's social group, as defined by the number of friends participants reported having was positively correlated with the number of photos a person reported having ( $r = .39, p = .000$ ). Finally, the number of photos correlated most strongly with maintained ( $r = .23, p = .000$ ) and bonding social capital ( $r = .20, p = .000$ ) measures, reflecting the extent of past ties sustained and close ties strengthened respectively on Facebook. As we will see, the college students' photographs are focused most strongly on social relationships.

### Qualitative analysis

Eighty-nine students who participated in the above survey were willing to have their photos more closely examined. This sample included 37 males and 52 females. For this group, the number of photos ranged from 1 to 1,523 ( $mean = 236; sd = 3.11; median = 124$ ), while the number of comments ranged from zero to 1,348 ( $mean = 152; sd = 2.11; median = 83$ ). Not

surprisingly, women had more photos of themselves (whether posted by themselves or others), averaging 337 to men's average number of photos of 93 ( $t(58) = 4.6; p = .000$ ). Likewise women ( $mean = 213$ ) had more comments about their photos than men ( $mean = 66; t(69) = 3.9; p = .000$ ). The number of photos was highly correlated with the number of comments ( $r = .716; p = .000$ ). Because these students were enrolled in an introductory mass communication class, most were freshmen or sophomores.

The results of this paper are organized around Chalfen's categories of analysis: the subject matter present in the photographs (participants, topics and settings) as well as what subject matter doesn't show up or show's up very little; the behavior of subjects; the photographic aesthetics of the images; the organization of the photographs and finally an analysis of the comments.

#### *Analysis – Participants, topics, settings*

Relationships are the dominant subject matter in all the photographs. The vast majority of the photos are of pairings or groups of friends, mostly of the same gender, posing for the camera at formal or planned events, such as parties or sporting events. This includes photos taken by a separate photographer and those shot by one of the subjects holding a camera out to photograph him or herself with a friend or friends, and was the norm for both men and women. Men were most often photographed with male friends, and women with women.

The dominance of the same-sex subjects in photos can most strongly be seen in high school prom photos encountered in the analysis. While there were photos of a person posing with his or her date, pinning on a boutonniere or corsage, or group shots of a series of couples posing in front of a house, the vast majority of photos presented either groups of female

friends posing in their dresses together, or groups of male friends posing together in their tuxedos. The bonding of same sex friends even at a couples' event was of the most importance. Similarly, high school graduation occasions often featured images of the subject posing with same sex friends in their caps and gowns.

The prevalence of same-sex group photos does not imply the absence of photos of people of the opposite sex together. At party settings, both male and female participants photographed with members of the opposite sex, posing in a platonic manner, or together, in large group photos featuring everyone present at the party. But overall, photographs revealed the importance of one's peer group, most often for these underclassmen, members of the same gender. Pictures with members of the opposite sex were posed in much of the same way as those with same sex friends. They revealed mostly friendships over romantic connections or even significant flirtation.

Once a person has a significant other of the opposite sex, the content of the posted photographs do change. In those cases, the relationship became the main focus of the photographic narrative, through the frequent posting of pictures of the couple alone (taken by a third party or by themselves holding a camera out), or posing with a group of one of the partner's same-sex friends. The romantic relationships were also demonstrated and confirmed visually through the amount of physical contact, usually reflected through sitting on the other's lap, hugging each other, and heads together.

Certain events were repeated within and across through most of the college student photo collections. These mostly included typical planned high school and college activities or rituals: parties, road trips with friends (to the beach, to New York City), dances and proms,

school-year holidays (such as Halloween and St. Patrick's Day), college sporting events, and, to a lesser extent, professional sporting events, and high school graduation. The recording and posting of a subject's participation in the social rituals of college is central. For example, a series of a group of male friends painting their chest in team colors, each with a letter of the school on his chest, was photographed, both during the painting process and at the actual sporting event. Still, almost any moment shared by friends is worthy to be recorded. Several other photos depicted driving in a car or riding on the subway or walking someplace or eating at a fast food restaurant. Friendships were confirmed through the inclusion of road trip photos, showing friends posing on the beach in swimming suits, at sites in the location being visited, such as Times Square in New York City, or in restaurants around a table.

Parties presented by far the most common setting for photos. These were most often posed photographs of groups of friends, often with bottles of beer or plastic cups in hand. Occasionally there were bottles of hard liquor shown. Few photos showed cigarette smoking. Drug usage or paraphernalia were also not present. Because of the age group under study, bars were less often the setting for drinking. Still, there was little or no effort to hide or avoid photographing underage drinking. In fact, it was most often blatantly included in the frame, by holding the bottle or glass up high or out toward the camera.

The importance of parties is reflected in the prevalence of certain holidays, such as such as Halloween and St. Patrick's Day, both holidays associated with parties and drinking. The vast majority of students had photos of Halloween, most often posing before a party in one's apartment or residence hall in costume with one's same sex friends. Outfits were important for St. Patrick's Day as well, as photos reveal the typical bright green shirt and green party hats.

Apparel becomes important to the various rituals of college life. Costumes were naturally prominent in Halloween party photos, green outfits for St. Patrick's day, while sporting events photos featured subjects donning team wear, displaying team or college affiliation. Photos would typically be taken in said outfits beforehand at one's apartment or dorm, on the subway or in a car going to the event, tailgating beforehand in the parking lot and sitting in the stands.

These rituals of college life seemed largely gender neutral, being equally common for male and female photographed subjects. In contrast, a visible gender divide became apparent in "hanging out" photos, that is photos of relaxation or "down time" in one's apartment or dorm, in casual clothing, such as sweats and t-shirts (i.e., not dressed to go out), most often again with members of one's gender. Women were much more likely to have photos of these moments, and these included laughing together, eating pizza, dying someone's hair and just talking. Another common photo for women was the reflection shot with another friend in a bathroom mirror. This could be in an apartment bathroom, but this was also seen in bar bathrooms. Most often these presented a series of at least three or four photos with the subjects playing with poses. Some women produced these mirror photographs of just themselves. Men were likely only to have pictures of actual formal events.

Portraits of the subjects alone were present, though they did not outnumber photos with friends. Portraits were both taken by the subject by holding out a camera, by using a mirror or by using a computer camera. Some men and women, would play with poses of themselves, posting a series of photos made at the same time with difference body positions or facial expressions.

Certain types of settings were not encountered often, although it bears repeating that the photos of each subject are not necessarily all the photos taken of this subject, but only the selection of photos that have been posted and tagged. With this in mind, most of the students displayed no images of themselves with family members, specifically with family members of older generations, including parents or grandparents. Similarly, few people had photographs with very young children. The few cases where parents appeared were at family functions such as holiday parties or weddings or of parents socializing with the subject and his/her peer group. In one case, a mother and father were playing beer pong with their college-aged daughter and her friends at their house. Family members, when they did appear, were more often to show up in photos before college started, up through the summer before freshman year. A few (though very few) new baby pictures were present, in the form of children of siblings. Older people did appear in the form of a celebrity, an athlete, or service personnel at a resort or restaurant with whom the friends are posing.

Negative events, such as illnesses or serious accidents were absent from these galleries. However, other, less somber yet embarrassing or “bad” photos remained, even when someone commented that this was awful or that they could not believe a photo was posted. The fact that the images and the comments were seen suggest that the commenter was not concerned enough to remove the image. One example is of a series of a girl dancing crazily with a drink in her hand, licking a girl’s face and licking the top of a girl friend’s chest. The fact that the image remains posted suggests she did not feel this was too embarrassing to take down, possibly containing some type of meaning for her and her peer group. To another embarrassing photo, the subject commented: “Bad hair!!!! DESTROY! DESTROY!” Similarly, another person

commented on a different photo: “LMAO hey hey. i thought we had an understanding that this night never happened. shush, [name removed] babe. trying to find our buried secrets.” Despite the private nature of the event described and the information revealed, these picture remain on public display, suggesting that their publicity surpasses the stated discontent or embarrassment brought on by the displayed image.

Landscapes and cityscapes without people in them were seldom posted. Landscapes were seen in photos of the subject or the subject and friends posing in the foreground of a wider image while on a trip, thus documenting the shared experience of being someplace together. Most of the travel images were likewise images of the subject with his or her friends, for example, posing with characters at Disney World along with friends. Most of the subjects never appeared with animals, whether pets from their parent’s house or pets they own in school. This latter example is not surprising since most of the subjects were still living in a dorm where pets are not allowed. Finally, images of students in classes or other academic campus buildings, or studying anywhere were absent, thus visually removing the academic side of the college experience from the college based presentation of the self.

#### *Analysis – Behavior*

Beyond subject matter, we looked at the types of activities and behaviors subjects were pursuing in the photos. What became immediately apparent was that subjects were almost always aware of and interacting with the camera/photographer. There were few candid photos taken or photos where the subjects were caught completely unaware. Most of the behavior was intentionally photographic in what would be considered a formal pose, standing and smiling facing the camera. Subjects were most often physically close to each other, with parts

of their bodies touching and their heads leaning into each other. Whereas women were more likely to be hugging someone in the photo with them, men would merely stand physically close to each other or have their arms around each other. But even this difference diminished at parties (presumably through the presence of alcohol), as men can often be seen hugging as well.

Furthermore, there was much exaggerated behavior directed to the camera, reflecting a variety of poses and a playful attitude. This was apparent through broad gestures (e.g., arms up above the head), exaggerated poses and facial expressions, such as large grins or laughing, sticking out one's tongues at the camera. Other behavior directed at the camera was overt drinking, which included being photographed drinking with a friend, playing drinking games such as beer pong or drinking from a liquor bottle. Most of these students are underage, and did not appear overly concerned with the illegality of underage drinking. The few candid photos were typically of play at a party, including drinking and drinking games, dancing and playing, often in a series where at least one image showing an awareness of the camera. People were also photographed outside of party situations, just goofing around with friends, playing outside, jumping on a friend's back, or laughing with friends.

Women were more likely to strike poses that were flirtatious or sexy. Women often posed in exaggerated sexy poses with each other, showing leg or exaggerating their cleavage. They also were more likely to cant their heads together for a pose. Their sexy poses were often recognized and complimented through comments from both male and female friends.

Many students generally have developed clear ways of posing for photographs by the end of their high school years. This is especially true for women. There are often series of

images of women alone or with friends in a non-event setting, practicing posing. Mirror shots allow immediate feedback on how one is posing before the camera. In one example, a young woman practices posing, a slight arch to her back, hand on hip, head slightly canted, even in self shots. This becomes her consistent poses throughout college images. Another guy is referred to in comments as always being in “picture mode”, have a specific look for the camera even in casual situations.

There was seldom overt sexual behavior, including few photos of people kissing on the lips. Lip to lip kissing was an indicator of a more serious relationship, and limited to those with significant others. On the other hand, the kissing of another person’s cheek was very common, both across and within the same gender. Kissing on the cheek was almost always highly exaggerated and comical, with laughter on the faces of both people. While this was very common for women, men could also be seen kissing the cheeks of women and, to a lesser extent, men (the latter was usually at a party and thus following the consumption of a certain amount of alcohol). The cheek kiss seemed to indicate a sign of close friendship.

Sexual behavior of any sort between non-serious couples was not photographed. There was only one photograph that showed a male subject at a distance kissing a girl. Comments revealed this was a one-time occurrence, with no other such “hook ups” documented and posted.

### *Analysis – Aesthetics*

The majority of the photos were centered and taken straight on with the subjects posed, looking at the camera/photographer. This is not surprising given that most of the photographers were not professionals and they were using point-and-shoot cameras. What

would be considered more sophisticated composition (e.g., rule of thirds, selective use of focus, foreground framing, etc.) was seldom seen. Most were taken at a medium to close distance, thus limiting the amount of background in the photos. The context of the photos materialized largely in the minds of the participants and viewers. One party tends to look much like another to outsiders. Captions can reveal contextual information identifying a specific party, but like family photo collections, captions weren't always included, beyond the tagged names of the subjects in the photos. The distance between the subjects and the photographer mainly depended upon the number of people to be included in the photographs. The majority of group shots were a single horizontal line facing the camera: the more subjects the further back the photographer had to stand. Wider shots were used when proof of a shared experience was needed, such as a wider shot with a football stadium in the background or a wider shot of friends posing in Times Square.

Another common aesthetic format was the "self shot", holding the camera out to capture one's self and, at times, friends. The photographer/subject's arm was thus seen extending to the corner of the frame and this often led to a slightly tilted horizon line. The act of including others in a self-shot photo demonstrates both a certain spontaneity (we must capture this moment now) and confirms the closeness of the friends (I want to take a photo with you). Where as a photo taken by someone else could be set up, self shot photos revealed a greater agency in determining the subject matter.

Web cam shots were often manipulated using the distortion controls of the image capture software. These allow for identity play by stretching or compressing one's image. Often Web cam photos appear in a series, revealing different facial expressions in each shot. Finally,

photos which were badly composed, such as those where people were cut off or titled, and those which were under- or over-lit, were still posted, assuming the content was of interest. People would still be tagged in a photo, even if only part of them could be seen.

### *Analysis – Organization*

Similar to Weblogs the photographs of each subject were in a reverse chronological order, with the most recent images first. Further, like most family photo albums, there was no clear structured narrative, but pictures were just organized around time. Unlike most family albums, which are based around a single photographer, the “photos of” each person are collective, based on all the images posted by the subject and his or her friends through tags. The current architecture of Facebook groups all pictures tagged with a person’s name under profile pictures, although individuals do have the option of ‘untagging,’ and thus removing their name, but not their image, from the photograph. In most family albums, the photographer is not often in the album or collection as often. With Facebook, the subject is often in the most of the photos in a collection.

The collective nature of this photo collection can create a deviation from chronological orders, depending on when different people post pictures from the same event. Further, people often post intentionally “nostalgic” photos from childhood or even earlier in high school, before Facebook. As we will see in the next section examining comments, friends react to these images in a nostalgic way, remember good times together in the past.

Finally, in all photos, the camera becomes part of the event. A number of people have and use cameras, as evidenced by the number of people posting images from the same event. Thus, there is a certain triangulation of the friendship circle, since the same groupings appear

through the lens of multiple cameras. This is true for all events, even the most formal such as proms. Moreover, the photographer is clearly known by and a member of the social cohort depicted. Poses that would be unlikely to an unknown photographer are quite common; including the hamminess and flipping off the photographer in jest.

### *Analysis – Comments*

The comments posted by friends reinforce group cohesiveness and closeness. Comments are tied to the pictures, not to the individual, meaning that everyone tagged in the photos will have the same set of shared comments. The group nature of comments can be seen through the consistent use of nicknames, references to inside jokes or past events, statements of affection and compliments, and gentle ribbing of each other. All these examples are understood by those in the know. The context of friendship allows for statements that those outside the group cannot make or would possibly find offensive. Comments allow friends to relive the pictured events, emphasizing the shared good times. Examples of this include statements, such as “OMG THIS IS SO SWEET! i remember this! We were intervieweddddd!” (sic). There are also references to longing or missing members of one’s friendship circle away at other schools, such as, “aww I miss this” or “I miss you guys”. Comments reinforce the group’s participation in college rituals, for example this series of comments about posing with alcohol:

Person a: “water???”

Person b: “if that’s what you like to call it...”

Person c: “and mommy and daddy think your sooo innocent. not fair”

Person b: “that’s why i’m the favorite :)” (sic)

People also relive embarrassing moments through comments, especially related to behavior while drunk, such as craziness and passing out. For example, "...left that shirt at my crib when u passed out in a bush..." (sic). Or "Whats that mark on my sweatshirt?" in reference to a stain from throwing up.

Many statements reflect a desire to be included in the group, whether to be included in the event pictured or to be tagged if one is pictured. "can someone please explain why no one tagged me in this!!!!" or "...it still means ur ass needs to get the hellzz down there woman." This last quote supports the group of friends through their absence, by expressing the desire for the left out individual to come visit.

Typically, the same recurring group of people will tend to comment on the photos, again demonstrating the tightness of the social group. Comments are not always about the content of the photos. The photos often bring up the opportunity for an extended conversation about individuals in the social group. The conversations sparked by a photo can encompass many posts extending over a period of time (even more than a year between the first and last comment on a photo). Comments continue a dialogue for those at a specific event and those who were not there but are part of the extended social network. Thus, these photo collections, like Facebook in general, allow vicarious participation in friend's lives even at a distance. People use comments and the photos to keep updated on their friends, such as "wtf bro when was this?" (sic). Photos can be used to link up with more distant friends – "adorable! how ya been chica?"

## Discussion

Carey (1975) emphasized a ritual view of communication, which helps foster community integration through the sharing of common experiences and values. This is clearly central to what is revealed in the collections of Facebook photos of college students. The commonality of the images within each student's collection and between all the students demonstrates that while the outfits and locations change, the types of events documented and the nature of the poses do not. The same stories are told and retold in these photographs. These images are highly conventional, both in terms of their subject matter and their aesthetics. These images record social rituals of college life, with little of the academic side.

These Facebook photos do not necessarily represent all photos taken by or of a person. These merely represent those images which a student or a friend has chosen to post and tag for others. Thus, these photos represent a strategic representation of a social group and social life in college. More than anything these photos allow colleges students to speak to each other visually, playing out their college lives for each other. These photos establish proof of an authentic college experience, one filled with friends and the rituals of college life, drinking, sports, and the closeness of a peer group. They do more than merely document the rituals. This is readily apparent by noticing what is lacking, images of parents and images with out friends. These photos help confirm one's independence from family and childhood.

These images demonstrate the primacy of relationships. The photos are all about the connection among college students, and for these primarily first and second year students, among those of the same gender. This echoes other authors who have argued that friends are especially important for members of Generation Y (Huntley, 2006), especially same-sex friends. It is interesting to see the change in focus of the photos as a serious relationship with a member

of the opposite sex occurs. Images of the couple begin to dominate. Chalfen (1987) had pointed out that college life was absent in the albums he examined. This study allows a glimpse at the transition from being part of a family to an independent photographic entity in one's own right. Further, the transition to a couple reflected the possible beginnings of a family collection of photos, focused around a dyad and not a larger peer group. For the larger peer group, images of embarrassment as well as joy draw friends together, helping support the authentic college experience and the bond one's friends. Close friends are expected to share both positive and negative moments, and only close friends would appreciate and decode embarrassing images in the correct spirit of group-bonding. These images are the equivalent of the gentle ribbing seen in the comments. Further, opening up oneself to potential ridicule demonstrates the trust extended to one's peer group.

Proof of the closeness of one's peer group is confirmed by both the quantity and nature of pictures displayed. The closer the relationships shared among friends, the more frequently they appear in photos with a student. Likewise, the more they appear, the more their friendship is confirmed. The poses and moments also reveal the closeness of friends. For women, this included moments of informal hanging out in one's residence. For both genders, this included physical closeness (including hugging and cheek kissing) and exaggerated poses. Physical closeness was most strongly seen when a student entered a serious relationship. Physical closeness indexes emotional closeness.

As stated earlier and consistent with previous work on personal photographs, the meaning of these images is constructed largely in the minds of the viewers and is intended for members of one's social group. Contextual information about location and time was largely

absent. These photos facilitate the recall of already existing memories, as evidenced by the posting of older photographs from childhood, which required no caption was needed. Members of the peer group recognized and responded to these nostalgic photos. By understanding the meaning in the photos, the cohesiveness of the social group was enhanced. Contextual elements, through backgrounds, are de-emphasized, suggesting the primacy of the human relationships and the existing knowledge in the head of viewers required for decoding the images. Facebook images were clearly appropriated by a closed group, used to reinforce membership and cohesiveness. Group membership affords a full understanding of the overt and latent meanings of photos, and subsequently, identifying these overt and latent meanings potentially enhanced one's sense of belonging.

The photos portray college students suspended in sociality, perpetually bonding with friends and toasting the best of times. Events are opportunities to connect with friends, and by representing those moments in posted Facebook photos reinforces the bonds of the relationships. While one game blurs in another and one party into another, the photographs of them tell a larger story of the importance of shared experiences of college life with one's closest friends. Once posted, these photographs create instant "good old days," upon which friends can reminisce and feel nostalgic, even if the event occurred just last night. For men, the sociality ends at formal events, emphasizing the importance of "drinking buddies," for women, sociality exists in both formal and informal moments. Women's friendships are built as much at parties as they are lounging in dorm rooms, reinforcing previous work on the importance of girl's bedroom culture in establishing identity and friendships (Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

Because pictures are posted by multiple people, the photo galleries are dynamic. These collections of photos are potentially always changing, thus presenting a confluent plane of activity upon which performances of the self are enacted, and 'tagged'. Just as people remove individuals from their home photo albums when divorce happens, Facebook collections can also change as individuals remove photos. This action removes the photos from the collections of all who are tagged on the photos, as well as the comments attached to the photos. Thus, the convergent nature of the platform allows these performances to constantly evolve and forever elude permanence, as they are subject to the multiple redactions of numerous audiences. This convergent context simultaneously references spaces and evolves beyond space, presenting what de Certeau (1984) has termed *a moving map*, upon which visual depictions of memories are pieced into narratives through the practice of 'tagging.' The fluid context upon which performances of the self are enacted affords reflexively shaped personal narratives of the self, which are indicative of what sociologists have described as a constant state of flux or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2005; Giddens, 1990).

Interestingly enough, the aesthetics and the form of the displayed photos place the self or multiple subjects at the center, frequently through camera placement that may appear awkward or unprofessional. The emphasis on the self is highlighted by the absence of contextual information, medium to close distance, limited background, awareness of the camera and behaviors produced specifically for the camera by a single or several subjects. The totality of these behaviors reflect a collectively performed narcissism, through which a single or multiple subjects exhibit self-referential behavior, that is then exponentially tagged, re-tagged, commented and referenced in further introspective moments that culminate to group

cohesion. These traces of narcissism are present in photographs that contain a single, two, or multiple subjects; the theme in common, reflective of narcissism, is the connoted enamoredness with the subject, dyad, or group photographed.

Given the general content of these visual galleries, which are structured around articulating individual autonomy and signaling independence from family and affiliation with peer groups, it would be more meaningful and accurate to interpret these narcissistic lapses as a step toward self-reflection and self-actualization, rather than instances of uncontrollable self-absorption. Lasch (1979) connected narcissistic behaviors to hedonistic tendencies reflective of a materialistic culture, but also clarified that while narcissistic behavior may be structured around the self, it is not motivated by selfish desire, but by a desire to better connect the self to society. Alternatively, in Sennet's (1974) terms, narcissism "takes the idea of the involuntary disclosure of character to its logical extreme," thus affording identity play and the performative extremes that we identified in this study. Moreover, the aesthetics of these photographs reflect what Mitchell (1995) calls meta-photography, that is, photographs that reveal the process of picture-making. These meta-photographs demonstrate the manner in which the camera becomes an extension of the body for these young people, most explicitly demonstrated in the self-shot photographs. In addition to the narcissistic overtones, the form of these pictures is aimed at further blurring the line between producer and subject, through group photos in which picture-takers and picture-posers dynamically rotate, and audiences viewing the photos participate in photographic meta-constructions through commenting and tagging.

This study suggests some interesting directions for future research. First, it builds on the literature of personal photography by examining the more public use of personal photographs

on social network sites. Most of the literature on personal photography has focused on how and what people present in the more private settings of the home. The Internet, as other media have before, blurs the distinction between private and public, thus upsetting conventions of storytelling and mnemonic recollection via photography. Second, this piece expands on Internet studies of self-presentation by focusing more closely on the photographic representation people offer of themselves. Finally, this paper attempts to place the photographic presentation college students offer in the context of a larger visual youth culture.

Of course the sample studied is limited to Facebook photos and is not meant to be representative of all college students. Still the consistency of the photo types allows us to draw conclusions about how college students use photos to speak to each other visually. Future research could attempt to track the changing nature and uses of these photographic repositories, following a smaller sample of college students as they photographically move through college years and beyond. In-depth interviews would help gain understanding of the roles that photographs play in these student's lives. These interviews also could help differentiate people who post a many photos from those who do not.

Facebook tagged photographs present more than random moments in a person's life. They present a suspended take on college-life sociality, through a collage of scenes celebrating the self, group culture and membership that are played out over and over again. The same scenes are repeated in a variety of photographed occasions as we find them comforting and reassuring. They provide visual evidence of social networks. Pictures reveal the transition from high school to college, but they do more than document; they allow photographed subjects to prove or confirm these milestones for each other; they validate the sense of a *real* college

experience. Facebook pictures are where college students visually play out their lives for each other, demonstrating their identity as college student. These practices serve as performative exercises of identity and belonging, simultaneously declaring and corroborating shared experiences.

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