THE HIGHLIGHT REEL AND THE REAL ME:
HOW ADOLESCENTS CONSTRUCT THE FACEBOOK FABLE

by

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is framed as a dangerous tool or at best, a colossal waste of time for adolescents. Stories of bullying, sexual exploitation, and adolescent idiocy dominate the mainstream and sociological narrative. Yet, there are few sociological studies of 13-18 year olds’ social media experience. Available research on this age group is presented from the perspectives of adults or focused on college students. This dissertation seeks to address this gap in the literature by presenting the Facebook stories of 26 adolescents (13-18). It reveals a more contemplative and positive story of adolescent Facebook use than that described in the literature.

To capture their lived experience I developed a social media ethnography, including a survey, focus groups, observation of Facebook images, and follow up interviews. These data show that while adolescents spend considerable effort on their impression management work to “document us being awesome,” they also want to present an authentic self. When this visual self presentation enters the public realm of Facebook it is altered by the awareness of an audience, and thus their authenticity is bounded by gendered social media rules that highlight masculinity/femininity.
Simultaneously they also engage in significant back stage work to evaluate how this presentation aligns with the “real me now.” Facebook provides a public space for this self reflection; it allows them to visualize the presentation of self and the feedback they receive on it. Over time these micro interactions and moments of self reflection work to constitute the evolving self.

This multi method study offers media studies a new framework from which to consider the deeper meanings that adolescents make and take from social media. It presents an example of thoughtful decision making that may challenge brain development research indicating that adolescents struggle with impulse control. It also addresses a significant gap in the adolescent development literature by suggesting that work normally done internally to craft the self narrative now has a public presentation. Adolescents are forging a new path to development, and impressively they are taking control of social media technology to do so in a way that is both complicated and potentially helpful.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ v

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. vii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ ix

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. xiv

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ xv

GLOSSARY ............................................................................................................................. xviii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................... 1

  Dissertation Outline ......................................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................... 10

  Adolescent Development: the Ever Expanding Period of the Life Course ..................... 12
  Adolescent Development in a Social Media Context: Testing Boundaries and Showcasing Social Worth ........................................................................................................ 18

  Facebook as a Social Interaction Framework: Symbolic Boundaries and Group Membership: ...................................................................................................................... 22

  Theoretical Framework #1: The Creation of the Personal Fable and the Emerging Authentic Self: .................................................................................................................. 26

  Theoretical Framework #2: Impression Management and the Personal Fable: ............ 29

  Theoretical Framework #3: the Gendered Facebook Performance: ............................ 33
Conclusion: ................................................................................................................. 43

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS ................................................................. 45

Methods Summary: ..................................................................................................... 46
Pilot Study: ................................................................................................................ 48
Recruitment Procedures: .......................................................................................... 49
Study Sample: ........................................................................................................... 50
Participant Demographics: ...................................................................................... 52
Survey Data: .............................................................................................................. 52
Focus Group Data: ..................................................................................................... 53
Facebook Image Observation: .................................................................................. 55
Follow Up Interviews: .............................................................................................. 57
Data Analysis: ........................................................................................................... 62
  Analytic Memoing .................................................................................................. 63
  Data Preparation and Readiness ........................................................................... 63
  Survey Data Analysis ............................................................................................ 64
  Focus Group Data Analysis ................................................................................... 65
  Image Analysis ...................................................................................................... 66
  Coding of Interview Data ..................................................................................... 70
Study Rigor: ............................................................................................................... 72

CHAPTER FOUR: PRODUCING THE HIGHLIGHT REEL AND THE REAL ME ... 74

The Online Personal Fable: ...................................................................................... 76
Externalizing the Fable: ................................................................. 79
Goffman and the Front Stage Presentation: ........................................ 81
Impression Management, Photo Shoots, and the Personal Fable: ............... 83
The Balance between Authenticity and the Highlights Reel: ......................... 96
Setting the Stage: The All Important Profile Picture: ................................ 101
Backing Up the First Impression: images from their timelines and albums: ........ 108
  Documenting Friendship: ........................................................................ 109
  Documenting the Self ............................................................................. 117
Conclusion: ................................................................................................ 128

CHAPTER FIVE: FACEBOOK RULES AND BOUNDARY DEMARCATION ...... 130
  The Rules of Facebook: ............................................................................ 131
  Authenticity Bounded by the Rules: ....................................................... 133
  Rule #1: Likes Mark your Social Status: ............................................... 137
  Rule #2: Images not Words Signal your "Highlights Reel": ....................... 144
  Rule #3: Don't Talk about Facebook: ..................................................... 147
  Rule Violation: ......................................................................................... 149
  Conclusion: ................................................................................................ 156

CHAPTER SIX: GENDERED RULES AND ENACTED ROLES...................... 158
  Rules for Girls: Feminity in a Social Context: .......................................... 158
    Rule #1: Enlist your Friends: .............................................................. 159
    Rule #2: Likes Signal Popularity: do anything to get them: ................... 161
    Rule #3: Status Trumps Rules: ............................................................ 164
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule #4: Indirect Meanness:</th>
<th>165</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule #5: A Feminine and Sexualized Presentation of the Self:</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys Rules: Be Real, Masculine, and Stupid Funny:</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule #1: Girls, Sports, Partying, and other Norms of Masculinity:</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule #2: Authenticity as an Impression Strategy:</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule #3: Mean in a Funny Way:</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule #4: Homophobic Comments to Confirm Masculinity:</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Categories of Worth:</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SOCIAL MEDIA SELF**

| The Social Media Self: The Internalization of the Fable: | 194 |
| Adolescent Development in a Social Media Context: | 198 |
| What Gets Presented: The Evolving Self in the Social Media Context: | 207 |
| Feedback and the Evolving Self: | 210 |
| The Facebook Friend Feedback Loop: | 211 |
| Facebook as a Mechanism for Inner Dialogue: | 214 |
| Self Judging the Fable: | 220 |
| Derailment of the Self and the Inner Dialogue: | 224 |
| Implications for Future Research: | 228 |
| Study Limitations: | 229 |
| Conclusions: Launching the evolving self: | 230 |

**APPENDICES**

| | 234 |
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Focus Groups Descriptives.................................................................................................................. 51

Table 2. Girls' Strategies to Increase Likes......................................................................................................... 162
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 21</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 44. .................................................................................................................. 136
Figure 45. .................................................................................................................. 136
Figure 46. .................................................................................................................. 139
Figure 47. .................................................................................................................. 145
Figure 48. .................................................................................................................. 166
Figure 49. .................................................................................................................. 170
Figure 50. .................................................................................................................. 171
Figure 51. .................................................................................................................. 178
Figure 52. .................................................................................................................. 178
Figure 53. .................................................................................................................. 181
Figure 54. .................................................................................................................. 185
Figure 55. .................................................................................................................. 186
Figure 56. .................................................................................................................. 187
Figure 57. .................................................................................................................. 189
Figure 58. .................................................................................................................. 190
Figure 59. .................................................................................................................. 203
Figure 60. .................................................................................................................. 216
Figure 61. .................................................................................................................. 217
Figure 62. .................................................................................................................. 218
Figure 63. .................................................................................................................. 222
Figure 64. .................................................................................................................. 226
GLOSSARY

**Bathroom Mirror Selfie:** These are pictures in which the person points the camera at the bathroom mirror to take a picture of the self. It can be a group or individual shot, usually done by girls. You can often see the flash in these images and they are mostly posed.

**Duck Face:** A pose teens make in which they pucker their lips and suck in their cheeks. Common among girls in the study, although few could articulate the reason for its appeal.

**Instagram:** A social media site that allows teens to share photos and apply digital filters to their images so that they can change the lighting, background, etc to make the image more flattering or artistic. They can put the image through Instagram before uploading it to Facebook. Facebook is the “mother company” of Instagram.

**Profile Picture:** The first impression picture that appears on the left corner of your Facebook and is the image people see when they search for you (regardless of the privacy settings you have). It is how you are identified on Facebook. The profile picture can be anything you want, but most people have an image that identifies the person.

**Pro Pic:** Abbreviation for profile picture.

**Selfie:** A photo that you take of yourself (arm outstretched) usually with your phone. A selfie can include just an individual or group of people.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Social media technology has transformed daily life in terms of how we communicate with one another, acquire and share news, and has even eclipsed our view of the wider world. These changes have been lightning fast given that the first mainstream social media site Friendster did not exist until 2002. Moreover this cultural change has affected everyone regardless of class, age, gender, race, and religion. However studying this complex phenomenon in real time is not a simple matter as there is no well-defined framework or methodology in place. The best that researchers can hope to do is to focus on one form of social media and examine its function and processes. This work will offer new insight into these through an examination of adolescents’ experiences with Facebook, currently the most popular social media site.

While this is a story of adolescent Facebook use, it is not the typical story of social media popularity contests, bullying, and procrastination presented so often in the popular press. Rather, this study seeks to introduce a part of the Facebook process that has not been documented in the literature in any significant way. While most research in the field assumes that the Facebook experience begins when the image or status update is first posted to the site, I will argue that the Facebook process begins from the moment teens engage in offline image creation. Thus, the Facebook experience is really divided into two connected phases, which I term the creation and live phases; the first takes place mostly offline, begins with image creation and assessment, and ends when the image gets posted to the site. While the work in this phase is offline, it is done in anticipation of being posted online, thus creating a truly blended online and offline experience.
The second phase of the process takes over from the moment the image goes “live” on Facebook and includes the online interactions and evaluations as well as actual postings. Because the live phase has been so well documented in the literature, this study highlights the creation phase that happens in anticipation of the image being posted on Facebook. This phase includes image creation, curation and evaluation of one’s images, and finally deciding what to post on Facebook. This early part of the process includes all of the back stage work that teens do to create their Facebook and is a period in which the offline and online are truly integrated. Currently in the field of social media studies we have no real sense of the back stage work teens do on social media or the meanings they give this work. We can assume it is important to them, but why and for what end? My research goal is to illuminate the part of the Facebook process that precedes their direct engagement with the technology and to posit that this back stage work has the ability to affirm or negate their developing sense of self. I will argue that it is a more thoughtful part of the Facebook experience than the surface processes that occur in the live phase and are so well documented in the literature. This is an important story to tell because it offers a different perspective from which to consider teen social media use and suggests that the technology may have implications for adolescent development.

One of the functions of Facebook, for better or worse, is for teens to document the self-- every fun time, every silly interaction, every party, and of course, the physical self—and to receive feedback on this presentation. But within this seemingly surface function there exists potential for deeply meaningful work. I will argue that in some ways the less obvious function of the Facebook work they do is to present the self to
represent a digital coming of age for adolescents; they are documenting themselves in the moment, the “real me now” as they call it, which has to have implications, positive or negative, for their self development. The work presented in this dissertation will outline these back stage Facebook processes and present a new way of thinking about their Facebook images as a curated visual of the self. The multi-method social media ethnography I developed to address these research issues is critical to this analysis because this process cannot be understood by looking only at the images teens post on Facebook. Indeed through this novel methodology it became clear that one cannot intuit from a single image much about the adolescent experience; it is only after hearing participants describe their back stage work that one can understand what the selected image represents for the individual. In the interviews participants described engaging in a self evaluation and dialogic process as part of this back stage work that has implications too for the subsequent front stage work on Facebook; in this way the images become visual evidence of the story of the self. This process is deeply meaningful and important to them, but it is not without its challenges as this reflective process can affirm the story of the self or challenge it. The latter chapters of this dissertation will focus on the self dialogic component of the backstage work, but first we have to reconsider what we think we know about their Facebook behaviors.

While researching and writing this dissertation, every adult to whom I described my work said something to the effect of, “so you are writing about how stupid they are.” And even after conducting this research I still can understand this perspective. It is hard not to be cynical when you see their images because on the surface they appear to support
the negative connotations we associate typically with adolescent Facebook use—the partying, the bikinis, the jock male flexing muscles, and the narcissistic obsession with documenting everything they do and how perfect they look doing it.

But this is just one part of the Facebook experience, the surface presentation that serves as a “highlights reel” of their lives, as one participant described it. What adolescents post on Facebook captures all their best moments—their most flattering pictures, their athletic and romantic successes, their peer network, and other amazing moments. Here are some of the images my participants posted during my research observation period in which they sought to “document us being awesome:” Marie changed her profile picture to a prom picture; a close up shot that captures her beautiful blue eyes and curly hair. Kenny posted pictures of his time in Europe with School Year Abroad; these images, mostly captured at night, show him posed either as the lone male with a group of girls or partying, the classic red Solo Cup held up to signal his drinking to other teens. Chris reposted his latest hockey picture in which he and his teammates are “throwing up the one” to indicate that they are the number one team, while Michelle posted a recent bikini picture after she used Instagram to create more flattering lighting for the image. When you couple these with the narratives in the popular press, which emphasizes either this surface presentation or the rare but truly horrific stories of the link between social media and depression and suicide, it is hard to see social media as anything but a danger for teens.

Added to this danger is the near obsessive amount of time the majority of teens spend on social media sites; 71 percent of participants reported checking Facebook more
than three times a day with no reported differences by gender. They want to see what other people are doing and whether any of their Facebook friends have interacted with their posts, either in the form of likes or comments. So even if Facebook is not a danger, is it anything more than one big popularity contest where teenagers try to outdo each other with their hot bikini pictures, sports images, or cool party pictures? I believe the dangers and fears of Facebook are rooted in the fact that the majority of the literature does not consider the back stage work as part of the process and looks only at the surface component of the Facebook process—the image posts/status updates, the interactions these generate (either likes or comments), and reactions to these.

In spite of what we may think of or assume about their pictures, the adolescents I spoke with are not mindlessly posting things to Facebook or wasting their lives in front of the computer instead of interacting in the “real world.” Thinking of Facebook in this way does not capture all the complexity and richness of teens’ social media experiences. This study is not just the story of a social media performance of the surface self following what may seem like rather rigid and traditional gender norms. And it is not just a description of the importance of likes to reflect a teenage popularity contest carried out online. Or rather, while those are the things that we may infer from a quick look at their images, there is a great deal of work that precedes these seemingly surface self presentations. So while I will present and describe the work that can be seen on Facebook, the images and the likes, the real contribution of this research to the fields of sociology and media studies is to reveal the work that adolescents do before an image even makes it to Facebook. Although on the surface Facebook is an online and deeply
social performance, at the same time the early latent (Merton 1957) phase of the Facebook process provides insight into the development work they are doing both on and offline.

The methods that I employed—focus groups and a two week observation period of participants’ Facebook images, followed by image analysis and interviews in which I spoke with participants about their image selection process—enabled me to hear what this backstage work sounds like. In almost all cases participants described well thought out Facebook actions; they describe thinking through what would happen when an image hits Facebook, both what it says about them and how it would be received. They talked about deciding what to capture in an image, the logistics of how to get this image, and of trying to interpret the feedback they receive. And perhaps most interestingly, they talked about evaluating this image as a piece of “micro-evidence” (Collins 2000). At every stage of this first Facebook phase they described a thoughtful execution, from photo creation to interpreting friend and self feedback after the image has been viewed on Facebook. This work is important to them in part because Facebook is a social accomplishment, a fact that has been well documented in the literature, but also because it provides an opportunity for self reflection and assessment. If they are doing thoughtful work to present the “real me now” on Facebook, then part of this work is in the self dialogue that happens when they evaluate their visual presentation. Ultimately this first phase of the process requires them to do work to reconcile their online presentation with the self story that they carry around in their minds about who they are at the moment.
While the development work that adolescents engage in on Facebook can be done offline, what makes this experience unique is that they are using the public space of Facebook as a catalyst for this work. Although we cannot see this work manifestly (Merton 1957) in the images or number of likes, it is there in the latent work that is done to create and select images of the self to represent the “real me” on social media. Documenting the Facebook work of this creation phase has implications for the fields of sociology, adolescent development, and media studies as it offers a new way of thinking about the symbiotic relationship between social media and adolescents. In important ways, adolescents are taking control of this technology and using it to post images that document the self as they see it in that moment. What is important about this evidence is that it is for two audiences; the hundreds of Facebook friends who will see and interact with their posts constitute one Facebook audience, but perhaps more importantly for this work, the self becomes a part of the Facebook audience when they use the technology to evaluate whether the Facebook presentation matches the inner narrative of the self. In their language, can they “back [the self] up” online? They are using the public space of Facebook as a place to further both an outer and inner dialogue. This dialogue, coupled with the feedback from peers, can work to affirm or derail the sense of self that is developing in adolescence. I believe that this is the real power of social media for adolescents.

**Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation has 7 chapters. Chapter 2 contains a summary of the sociological and social psychological literature on social media and presents my
argument for how this study addresses two important gaps in the literature. I argue that the current literature on the “adolescent experience” does not adequately capture the voices of younger adolescents (age 13-18) nor does it do enough to highlight the back stage work of Facebook. I also present the sociological frames such as Goffman’s (1959) impression management and the theory of the personal fable that informs this work.

Chapter 3 presents my theory generating methodology. In this chapter I outline the data collection and analysis I conducted and ultimately argue that these original methods led me to these findings of the latent functions (Merton 1957) of Facebook.

In Chapters 4-6 I present the rich data and conceptual interpretations that are the result of the image and interview data analysis. In these chapters I outline the Facebook surface presentation and introduce the rules that bound the externalization of the self on social media. Chapter 4 introduces the surface self presentation, or the front stage work, and documents what the teens in the study posted on Facebook. This is where the literature begins and as such, it is an appropriate place from which to begin the data analysis. In this chapter I introduce several image typologies to frame the ways in which study participants present the highlights reel of their lives on social media. This chapter also addresses peer feedback in the form of likes and comments. In Chapter 5, I document and illustrate the invisible rules of Facebook that adolescents use to guide their presentation of the self. Although adolescents do not discuss these unwritten rules, they learn them by observing others’ Facebook actions and use these rules to manage their impressions. Thus, the self that gets presented on Facebook is bound by the social rules they internalize. These rules also serve to highlight social categories of worth, separating
those who can follow the rules from those who cannot. In Chapter 6 the rules are considered from a gender perspective to argue that outside of some universal rules such as being authentic and emphasizing appearance, the Facebook experience is largely a gendered one. The importance at this age of affirming masculinity in boys and femininity in girls is profound.

In Chapter 7 I return to the back stage work to focus on the inner dialogue that the Facebook performance cultivates in adolescents. I argue that some of the most important Facebook work happens when teens curate and examine their photographs before the image is even posted to Facebook. I also elaborate on my interpretive theory of adolescent social media use to argue that the self reflection social media provides for adolescents is altering their path to self development. The chapter ends with a discussion of the study limitations and outlines areas for future research. While more work needs to be done in this field, I contend that the story of adolescent social media usage is a complicated, but necessary one for us to understand. Regardless of what we think, adolescents are co-opting the technology and using it in ways that have implications for their self development.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a rich and varied literature on social media, mostly using college aged participants to describe this complex and culture changing technological experience. The four main bodies of work in this field focus on the surface processes of the social media structure, which take place in what I have termed the live phase of the process. It is the well documented story of the images and status updates, the likes and comments, and the effects of these interactions on the individual. Some researchers have focused on the amount of time that teens spend on various social media sites, what they do while on these sites, and whether there are any demographic differences in these findings. In 2012 94 percent of adolescent social media users had a Facebook account (Pew 2013). While much has been made in the popular press about the decreasing use of Facebook amongst teens, as of August 2013, Pew survey data indicates that it remains their most utilized social media profile. Twitter follows in a distant second place with only 26 percent of teens reporting profiles (Madden 2013). While Twitter, Instagram and sites like Ask.fm will certainly rise in popularity as teen culture moves on to the next cool site, it is fair to assume that regardless of what site they use, the presence of social media in adolescents’ lives and their interest in visually documenting oneself online will not decline in the near future.

Others have concentrated on the actual image or update that gets posted and/or the reactions and interactions that the item receives. This is the research about the importance of likes and the work they do to obtain more likes, the meanings of these Facebook interactions, and the effects they can have on individual self-esteem (O’Keefe
and Clarke-Pearson 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008; Christofides, Muise and Desmarais 2009). Another branch of research focuses solely on the very real potential for negative social media interactions, whether it is cyberbullying, sexually explicit posts, or partying, and the effect that these behaviors can have on adolescent emotional and physical health (Breuer 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2006).

Finally, there is a significant group of researchers who approach the field of social media with the assumption that the technology detracts from reality or important social interactions; they describe online social networking as a means to disengage from “real life” and “real relationships” (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, Scherlis 1998), thereby increasing social isolation. These descriptions conjure images of awkward teenagers whose social life consists of computer friends, anime, and virtual worlds. Literature that falls within this framework emphasizes the effect social media has on teens’ social skills, relationships, academic performance, and even most recently in research on the sleep deprivation that teens incur by trying to keep up with social media on a daily basis (Holson 2014). Time online is framed as a precursor to attention deficit issues, as teens engage in “self splitting” between a variety of different technologies and tasks simultaneously (Turkle 2007), or just as a way to procrastinate from schoolwork. The result is that adolescent social media usage is popularly framed as contested; we are not really sure what they are doing online and why, and in some cases such as the 2006 suicide of a teen girl after habitual cyber bulling on MySpace, online social networking appears dangerous. Other researchers looking at similar issues argue the virtual opposite,
noting that social media is helpful for developing social and communication skills (Goldberg 2009; O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson 2011).

All of this literature is important as it helps to give shape to this rich and complex social experience. These main areas of research describe important components of the process; however they are all focused on the second, live phase of the Facebook experience (i.e. the surface processes of the Facebook experience). Although I contend that it is important and valuable to understand the effects of the surface self presentation, I also challenge the assumption that this surface process is a complete description of this complicated process. What current literature in the field cannot tell us is what the early part of the process, the back stage work of the creation phase, looks like for teens and what impact this part of the process may have on their development. In order to illuminate this gap I will use this literature review and images from this study to present what we do know about the second phase of the Facebook process. I then explore some of the sociological and psychosocial theories such as impression management, gender performance, and the personal fable that have helped further my thinking on the early back stage part of the process. First I review the literature in adolescent development to define adolescence as a period in the life course.

**Adolescent Development: the Ever Expanding Period of the Life Course**

An emerging sense of self is a critical aspect of adolescent development, and indeed figuring out who I am and where I fit in, are some of the most critical questions to answer in adolescence. The first task though is to define adolescence. Life course researchers present adolescence as a socially constructed stage because the boundaries we
place on this period create a “social reality” of adolescence (Elder 1975). The notion of adolescence as a stage between childhood and adulthood first entered our vernacular around 1900; however it did not become a culturally relevant category until the end of World War II (Elder 1975; Smith and Denton 2005). In spite of how easily we use the term, there have never been clear age boundaries for adolescence; we generally consider adolescence as the stage between puberty, around age 13, and the end of high school at 18 years old (Elder 1975). This category suggests that adolescence is marked by transitions; first the biological end of childhood, and later the social end of parental dependence marked by high school graduation. While this age range may have held true in the past, current research suggests this five year age bracket does not necessarily capture these transitions; puberty often occurs earlier and independence may come later as teens remain or return home because of the financial burden of independent living (Kazdin 1993). Thus currently we are adding years to this category by expanding the age limits on both ends, which means that this period of adolescence may continue to expand as a cultural category.

Although early work in adolescent development in the life course was dominated by these biologically defined stages, thinking has evolved to consider also the ways in which social factors shape our lives and even our biology (Settersten and Mayer 1997). As such, although we may use age markers to define adolescence in everyday speech, for life course researchers the period is better defined by the social impacts that occur in adolescents’ lives during this time. Erikson (1959), one of the most preeminent scholars of adolescent psychosocial development research, was less concerned with establishing
the age limits of adolescence than with positioning it as a time of psychosocial internal struggle. He argued that this stage is “only complete when the individual has subordinated his [sic] childhood identifications to a new kind of identity achieved socially with other same age friends” (119). Erikson’s (1980) definition implies a tension; adolescence is a time of internal struggle between the self of childhood and the self of adolescence, and there is wavering between the two until eventually the teen no longer sees him or herself as a child. As a result of this tension, adolescence may be best thought of as a “developmental limbo” (Smith and Denton 2005: 184) between childhood and adulthood.

Of particular interest to this research is the opposite end of the spectrum: the tension between adolescence and adulthood. Adolescents are expected to be mature, but we do not want them to be fully mature, as is evident by adult reactions to their more mature Facebook images. Fine (2004) describes the adolescent cultural tool kit as containing both adolescent and adult strategies, and teens consistently work to determine which set of skills and abilities are appropriate to implement in each context. This is definitely evident on Facebook; teens post sexually mature images in one moment and then appear very childlike in other moments. Figures 1 and 2 are two of 16 year-old Carly’s pictures taken just two months apart. They are similar in that they are both individual images she posted herself, but the tone of these images could not be more different. In Figure 1 she gives the impression of a young teen while in Figure 2 she looks much more mature, both in her physical self and expression.
Figure 1
Thinking of adolescence as a period of limbo makes Facebook a natural resource as it gives them the opportunity to try out new, perhaps more mature or different, narratives of the self as they evolve and receive feedback on them. Inherent in this then, is a degree of freedom to present new versions of the self; as teens evolve, they can alter their Facebook to represent “the real me” as they see it in that moment.

In addition to being an uncertain time for self development, adolescence is also a period of neurological developmental limbo as well. Recent research in adolescent neurology points out that although adolescence marks sexual maturity, it does not
necessarily coincide with neurological maturity. While it was previously assumed that the brain matured when it finished growing in childhood, recent research suggests that the adolescent brain matures much more slowly than the physical self (Adolescent Brain Development 2002). According to data from the National Institute of Mental Health, parts of the brain, particularly grey matter, do not reach maturation until the early 20s (2011). Additionally, while the onset of puberty has begun earlier in the United States in the last 50 years, there is no evidence to suggest that the “early activation of reproductive maturity would create a parallel advance of cognitive development; even if physical development, sexual maturation, and bone age are consistent with that of a 14 year old girl, she will still have an 8 year olds level of experience, reasoning ability, logic, and other mental capabilities”(Dahl 2008: 15). This means that reproductive maturity may be completed well before cognitive maturity, which has important implications for any research on adolescence, but particularly that concerning social media, which presents more than its fair share of opportunities of sexualized imagery and comments.

In addition to the slower pace of cognitive development relative to biological development, it is important to note that recent research in cognitive neuroscience suggests that brain regions develop at different rates; the amygdala, the area responsible for emotional reaction, fear, and aggression, reaches maturity far earlier than the frontal lobe, which allows for reason, self awareness, and a deep understanding of cause and effect (Cooney 2010). The slower development of the frontal lobe makes younger adolescents more susceptible to act on impulse, misinterpret social cues and emotions, get into accidents and fights, and engage in other generally risky behaviors (The Teen Brain
These biological developments have social media consequences; if adolescents are more prone to risk taking and intense emotions due to their brain development, this could play a role in the ways in which they behave on Facebook and the ways in which they react to others’ posts. While I am not advocating biological determinism, nor will this research be driven by neurobiology, the recent developments in adolescent neurology are important to note as they illustrate a potential relationship between the biological and the social (Bird and Rieker 2008) in this research and may provide insight into adolescent online behaviors or their reactions to other’s postings.

Adolescent Development in a Social Media Context: Testing Boundaries and Showcasing Social Worth

Adolescent development does not take place in a vacuum; rather it is achieved largely within the context of peer relationships (Erikson 1980), which means that these peer relationships are important and necessary for understanding the self in adolescence. As teens work to become independent from their parents they become more invested in obtaining peer approval (Cook et al. 2002), and as such, peer relationships become highly influential (Steinberg and Morris 2001; Milner 2004). Social media has of course provided another mechanism through which relationships can be cultivated or diminished, peer influence transmitted, and social worth can be conveyed. According to the Pew Institute’s 2013 data, the average teen has 300 Facebook friends (Madden et al 2013). Twenty of the 26 participants in my study have more than 500 Facebook friends. To say that Facebook has broadened their social circle and available peer contexts would
certainly be an understatement. If there is a certain thing, it is that Facebook friends matter for my participants.

Valkenburg, Peter, and Shouten (2006) argue that early to mid-adolescence is a period of self-focus during which adolescents “overestimate the extent to which others are watching and evaluating” them and are “preoccupied with how they appear” (584). This experience is naturally heightened on social media as adolescents know those who see their images are judging them, and indeed the likes button serves as a visual representation of the judgment. In the survey data 87 percent of participants indicated that they checked Facebook two or more times a day. In interviews they said that they check Facebook repeatedly after they post something to see how it was judged by others; to Valkenburg et al’s (2006) point, they post on Facebook believing that it will be seen and judged on some level. Participants were clearly concerned with how they appear, emphasizing in particular images that highlight their physical appearance and social worth, which is depicted on Facebook through images with friends and the fun things that they do together. This concern with appearance and social worth means that a cursory glance at teens’ Facebook images reveal very surface presentations of the self, ones that are “documenting us being awesome,” as one of my male participants described it.

Social worth becomes important on Facebook because the technology provides an opportunity to “know me by my friends” (Zhao et al 2008: 1825) and therefore Facebook can be used to showcase social relationships and status. Research suggests that college students are willing to engage in this work because they believe their Facebook presence is a reflection of their social status (Christofides et al 2009). The implication then is that
those with high levels of “participation by others” on their Facebook page (in the form of comments, photo tags, pictures of large groups of people, etc) are more popular (Christofides et al 2009; Livingstone 2008; Zhao et al 2008). Although not all participants acknowledge such a direct link, they all agree that likes are generally indicative of popularity. Teens work hard to obtain peer interaction on their pages to visibly demonstrate their social worth; posting a picture that nobody comments on, or conversely posting something that many people comment on, can affect one’s self assessed social worth regardless of its impact on offline status. I will argue that, barring major social violations, these posts rarely directly impact offline social status, but I do believe they have a significant impact on participants’ perceptions of their position in the social hierarchy. This is one example of both the draw and danger of Facebook.

In the research on college students, one common way to showcase social status is to post images of friend groups, which allow one’s larger group of Facebook friends to see the poster within the context of his/her friends and the fun activities they do together (Zhao et al 2008). All participants, but particularly the younger girls in the study certainly use Facebook to showcase their friendships, and while I do not believe this was the sole objective of their work, everyone said it was important to show images with friends and considered it a “red flag” if they did not see images with friends on others’ Facebooks.

Because their Facebook experiences are so closely linked to their offline world, Facebook must be subject to many of the same social opportunities and risks as their offline social world. Decisions about what to post (either photographic or textual posts),
and perhaps more importantly, whether or not people “like” or comment on your posts, impacts the narrative of self teens are working hard to develop, because fundamentally the like, or “thumbs up,” appears to function as an indicator of one’s perceived self worth.

One indication that Facebook plays a significant role in how adolescents think about their social status comes from a recent medical study by O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson (2011), which linked depression to Facebook usage in children they defined as low self-esteem. In an interview O’Keefe states “With in-your-face friends’ tallies, status updates, and photos of happy-looking people having great times, Facebook pages can make some children feel even worse if they think they do not measure up. It can be more painful than sitting alone in a school cafeteria or other real-life encounters that can make kids feel down…because Facebook provides a skewed view of what is really going on” (Associated Press March 28 2011). These survey results are important to highlight, however as O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson note, the story is complicated by the important positive component of the teen social media story. While Facebook can present a “skewed reality of what is going on” as O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) argued, it can also foster communication and creativity. In my in-depth interviews I was able to determine that showcasing popularity, much like showcasing physical appearance, is only the surface front stage work that teens are doing on Facebook. Each picture they select for Facebook serves to visually represent their self story telling at this moment. When describing their images in interviews, they talked about wanting to be authentic and present their reality through the strategic presentation of images. I know that teens can be
hurt on Facebook, and I will present evidence of this in their own words in this dissertation, but like others such as boyd (2013) and O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) note, the data does not indicate that the work they do on Facebook has uniformly negative effects.

The adolescents in my study are not simply hoping for online social popularity, and indeed they suggested that the notion of online popularity seems to be relegated to those who seek out a YouTube or blog presence. They also acknowledge that Facebook probably will not make them more popular offline either. Fifty percent of respondents said Facebook is only “somewhat important” for their social life, 33 percent reported it is “important,” and only four percent as “very important.” While there are some gender differences, with girls reporting slightly higher results (42 percent rated it “important” vs. 25 percent of boys), neither gender reported that Facebook was adding or detracting from their offline experience. What they did describe was that for them, Facebook offers a way to extend and reaffirm their social world, similar to attending social events at school, for example. Having 500 Facebook friends appears to mean something and has real consequences for adolescents, and I argue the importance of this has been ignored in large part by social science researchers.

**Facebook as a Social Interaction Framework: Symbolic Boundaries and Group Membership**

Similar to offline experiences, group membership on Facebook is negotiated and confirmed through symbolic boundaries, which are the “group boundaries that demarcate the limits of groups—or outsiders from insiders—who share common values or common
definitions of the sacred, of stigma, or of exclusion” (Lamont and Thevenot 2000: 4).

These symbolic boundaries allow people to create and understand in-groups and out-groups and give people the language and rationale for categorizing the “other,” which serves to clarify and distinguish one’s own group memberships (Lamont 2000). The challenge with boundary work is that while one wants to be distinct from the group so as not to lose one’s unique self concept, one cannot be so distinct that he or she does not appear to fit in with the group (Lamont and Molnar 2002). This tension between standing out and fitting in exists for any group memberships irrespective of age and context (Hewitt 1989); however, it seems likely that this conflict may be exaggerated during adolescence because of the importance of peer groups and social status for this age group.

Embedded in these symbolic boundaries are “cultural categories of worth (Steensland 2006),” which we use to judge those who are not part of our in-group. Steensland’s (2006) research on American’s perceptions of welfare recipients found that we possess mental maps to categorize the deserving and undeserving poor, which we use to form our opinions about who should be eligible for welfare subsidies. Similarly, in Blair-Loy’s (2001) work on work-family balance she found that women create elaborate schemas to explain, or perhaps justify, their commitment to work and/or family. Working mothers, for example, may create a category of worth around their work by suggesting that it presents a positive example of modern women to their children. In contrast, stay at home mothers may define worth as time spent raising children. These cultural categories are essentially the scripts we use to explain the boundaries we draw between groups, which help us to develop or refine our group and its position relative to others. The
schemas of worth help us construct and maintain our boundaries and validate our identities.

Cultural understandings, such as habits and preferences, connect us to others in our group (Jacobs and Spillman 2005), and therefore group boundaries will be drawn around common values and/or common interests. And indeed I saw this often on Facebook, whether it was through tagging images or creating affinity groups. Additionally, and perhaps particularly relevant for adolescents, these symbolic boundaries can be communicated through physical attributes of distinction, such as dress, to solidify group membership (Blair-Loy 2001). Below is an example of the way that dress communicated group membership for my participant Samantha. In Figure 3, which Samantha did not take but was tagged in, the girls are all wearing virtually identical outfits—white shirts and skinny colored jeans. When speaking to Samantha about this image, she noted that she loved it and thought it was hilarious that so many of her friends were wearing the same outfit to school. For her, this image indicates her peer group membership.
Teens use these grammars or categories of worth (Steensland 2006; Lamont and Thevenot 2000) to create and maintain their peer social hierarchies; they possess scripts about the social merit of things such as appearance, friendship networks, and academic or athletic achievement and place themselves and others into certain categories based on their social worth. Group memberships can improve or devalue one’s social status. This importantly can go both ways; while it is obvious that the popular group will look down on the less popular, it is also the case that other more ostracized groups such as Goths or computer geeks may devalue the popular group. I have examples of both in my study; there are the stories of Kenny and Jake, who suffered through some significant bullying by “cool” boys in their schools, and there are the examples of Noah and Rebecca, who are more alternative in style and admittedly less popular, who told me that they use
Facebook as an opportunity to mock the “popular” kids or “cool” things. In both cases, power is negotiated through the categories of worth.

Social status is incredibly important for adolescents, as in large part, it is the mechanism through which they feel powerful (Milner 2004), which may have implications for their confidence. Adolescent social status creates a form of symbolic power as those with high status within the social hierarchy are powerful because others in the group accept their authority (Bourdieu 1984). Adolescents focus on the social hierarchies in which they are embedded because they determine the peer group and romantic options available to them. Status is not unlimited within the social hierarchy, but rather a finite good that is won or lost; if one’s status improves it comes at the expense of another’s status (Milner 2004). As a result, status must be guarded and maintained through status markers such as clothes and the “small cruelties” (Milner 2004) that adolescents inflict on one another to ensure their elevated status position in the group. Small cruelties of course happen on and offline and several examples of these small cruelties will be presented in the data.

**Theoretical Framework 1: The Creation of the Personal Fable and the Emerging Authentic Self**

Thus far I have mentioned the work that adolescents do on Facebook, but what is this work really? I will argue that this work is more than just a collection that highlights the surface self. Rather it is to put forth a notion of the self. In essence, to develop a Facebook profile teens create a visual narrative of who they are at that moment, which may be the most important argument for the benefits of Facebook. This discussion of self should not be lumped into work on identity development. I did not speak to the
participants about their identities, simply because this question is both too obvious and too ambiguous. Rather, my interest is in the small moments; the “micro-evidence” we reveal in the stories we tell ourselves and occasionally others, to explain ourselves (Collins 2000). These narratives are ever changing and deeply personal. I believe that these micro decisions about the self can and should be documented and analyzed without attempting to label participants’ identities. In fact, while identity is important to this process, I contend that the work is more fluid than what is implied by identity. Thinking only in terms of identity obscures the dynamic aspect of the personal fable work on Facebook. The data that will be presented shows that these stories and the images that represent them may be tried and discarded or solidified. Although the work that I document here may someday lead to identity formation, I do not claim to know how this process takes place. Instead, I have focused on how the micro decisions about the self that get projected on Facebook affect the development of an internal self story in adolescence.

The concept of the personal fable was developed as a way to describe the story that we tell ourselves about who we are (Elkind 1967; Vartarian 2000). In essence, the personal fable is the way we weave our stories, experiences, and even our personalities together to make sense of our place in the world. As it was originally defined by Elkind (1967), the personal fable that one constructs overemphasizes the person’s uniqueness and importance; because it is an individual and internal narrative, it tends to focus on how our story is different from others around us. The fable is really the result of our impression management work (Goffman 1959) and social constructionism more broadly,
which will be reviewed in the next section. I believe that the personal fable concept lends itself well to the development work in which adolescents are engaged. Researchers tend to agree that a shift to independence and seeing themselves as individuals separate from their families is the hallmark of adolescence (Harrison 2005; Thorlindsson and Bernburg 2008). Thus, adolescence is a period in which the notion of “over-differentiation” is highlighted (Vartarian 2000: 642), which may make the personal fable even more relevant in adolescence. The clichéd teen refrain that “no one understands what I am going through” is accurate when thought of in light of the personal fable; no one understands your story because no one shares your experiences or internal dialogic process. It is important to note that the over-differentiation here is largely internal; it is the idea that no one feels or sees things as you do. This is in direct contrast to the external conformity of dress, style, etc. that is evident in participants. The external conformity, showcased so clearly in the picture above of the girls in their matching colored jeans, confirms your position in the social group. Thus, there is simultaneously an over-differentiation of the internal self development and a hyper conformity of the external self for group demarcation.

While personal fable theory tends to spotlight the overemphasis on one’s uniqueness and the negative consequences this can have for adolescent risk taking and behaviors (Elkind 1967; Vartanian 2000), there is something more basic at the root of the theory that is compelling for an analysis of Facebook usage. The personal fable is fundamentally about creating your story and figuring out how that story makes sense of one’s place in the world. While Elkind (1967) thought of the personal fable as a story
that is created internally and maybe only shared in diaries or the like, I believe that Facebook has made the fable public. We showcase images on Facebook that highlight our story—it is the visual representation of what we tell ourselves in our minds. Although the image may not explain everything to the viewer, it serves a purpose for the poster. Not all of the fable work is public though; while the depiction is visible, the evaluation and adjustment or confirmation work that goes on after the public fable is posted, remains largely private and internal.

**Theoretical Framework 2: Impression Management and the Personal Fable**

The presentation of their story is done with the knowledge that it will be seen and judged by their Facebook friends. As such, this presentation requires great care and time. Participants spoke of selecting and crafting images that are both important and telling and very rarely posted images that meant nothing to them. To understand this strategy work, I have employed Goffman’s (1959) notion of impression management. Goffman evoked his “dramaturgical approach” to argue that we present the self through a series of performances that are audience and context dependent. For Goffman we are constantly performing in multiple roles over the course of the day and generally speaking, we know what is expected of us and we in turn give the appropriate performance. Embedded in Goffman’s dramaturgy is his theory of impression management. Goffman believed that the performance is iterative; there is the performance, an interpretation of the feedback one receives on the performance, and finally an adjustment of the performance, when warranted, based on the interpretation of the feedback. This theory is readily applied to Facebook, and indeed many researchers have called upon Goffman’s notion of the
performance, or impression management more specifically, to explain the ways in which people present themselves on Facebook (Tufekci 2008; Robinson 2007; Walther 2008; Papacharissi 2009; boyd 2007; Hogan 2010; Zarghooni 2007).

This process begins with a performance of a component of the fable on Facebook. Next, the presentation receives feedback in the form of likes or comments or some combination of the two. The individual then has a chance to interpret and make sense of the feedback and think about how it reflects his/her personal fable. This is important and sensitive work and involves the individual really putting his or herself out there. This may explain at least in part the hold Facebook has on some teens—the obsessive checking of likes, engaging in strategies to get likes, etc. This is not just a question of how people think you look in a bikini. Rather in addition to the surface approval, the bikini picture links to the story of the self. Indeed, while almost all the girls had some version of the bikini picture, they all had far more to say about these images than just “I picked it because I looked good.”

Goffman’s impression management theory also links to symbolic boundary work and categories of worth for adolescents. As mentioned earlier, Zhao et al (2008) found that people believe those with high levels of “participation by others” on their Facebook page are more popular than those with less participation. My participants did not report such a neat association, noting that while you can be Facebook popular and not popular offline, and vice versa, however they agreed with these findings generally. Facebook is a front stage performance of their social interactions. Turkle (2011) found that college students do not email each other or use the message feature on Facebook because these
“will do nothing for your image” (251). While my participants refute this, and actually say that they utilize the Facebook private messaging feature more often than the main page, I do agree that the messaging feature is more similar to a private conversation than the images or statuses they post on Facebook. So if posting images and statuses on Facebook are front stage performances, and participation by others signals social worth, then the performance creates the opportunity for boundary work. The comments adolescents receive offer visual proof of their connections, which means that Goffman’s interpretation stage is powerful; not only are they able to use the technology as at least an indicator of their social worth, it is broadcast for all of their Facebook friends to see as well.

Describing their actions on Facebook as a performance implies some degree of disingenuousness; if we are always managing our impressions on Facebook, when do we stop the performance? Is Facebook just a presentation of some fantasy world? I argue that while the notion of impression management may make it all sound very strategic, it is no less authentic than our offline performances. And perhaps most importantly, even if we perform, we never see our performances as inauthentic. Ewing (1990) and DiMaggio (1997) write of the context-driven self, by which they mean that the context drives the presentation of the self; there is nothing artificial about the presentation, and indeed the individual is not even aware of any contradictions that may exist between the performances she gives, because she is being true to herself in each context (Ewing 1990). It is important to note that authenticity is itself a social construction that can require more effort than inauthenticity. In our offline lives we use our contexts as our
cues for the presentation we give. Adolescents do the same on Facebook, and indeed almost every participant spoke to me about how important it is to be authentic on Facebook. They work hard to ensure that they showcase their “true” selves as they interpret it at this moment, albeit perhaps at their best. But again, this is not different from what we do offline; no one saves unflattering or mundane pictures for a photo album. Rather, we save the memories that reflect our greatest moments; our “highlights reel” as one participant described Facebook.

One interesting nuance of the presentation of the authentic emerging self is that one would assume that the adjustment phase of the performance would mean that adolescents would remove embarrassing pictures, rude posts, etc. that may negatively influence the performance or signal low status to others. However, in reality unflattering pictures and comments are rarely removed (Walther 2008). For some participants the negative comments remain because the absence of any feedback is perceived as worse than negative feedback, but others leave their embarrassing images to document the evolving self; looking at embarrassing 8th grade photos can be a source of amusement and signal of positive growth for a graduating senior. Again, the key point here is that the presentation of the self, including the occasional blips and missteps, must be authentic. They care so much about this because developmentally it is exactly what they should be doing; working to develop a sense of who they really are. What we see on Facebook then is the work to create, in all contexts, an authentic self. The self we see in adolescence is perhaps more contradictory and more confusing, precisely because they are all of these things; the self for in adolescence is emerging. And as I conclude the work they do to
create this narrative through visual images is the great asset of social media; sites such as Facebook allow them to work through the personal narrative, think about how to present it strategically to their social groups, and then reflect upon it both individually before posting, which almost all of them do, and after receiving feedback from peers.

**Theoretical Framework 3: The Gendered Facebook Performance**

Gender is likely to matter for adolescent Facebook usage because research suggests that it plays a significant role in the ways in which adolescence is experienced generally (Gilligan, 1987; 1982; Steinberg and Morris 2001). It is also in adolescence that teens figure out the available options for expressing gender (Thorne 1993). West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion that gender is enacted in social settings is particularly relevant for adolescence as this is the time when they are learning exactly how to perform gender. They rely on their relationships and the social context, including Facebook, for feedback on how well they have performed their gender roles. As such, if one’s gender performance is culturally and socially constructed, then it will be both performed and evaluated on Facebook. However, the current research on adolescent Facebook use does not examine the ways in which gender is enacted on the site beyond the differences in usage rates or the number of friends by gender. My research suggests that gender plays a role in both the ways that Facebook images are created, selected, (i.e. what is posted, what receives comments, etc) and experienced.

There are many rules of Facebook that will be outlined in a subsequent chapter, and while I do not believe the rules are fundamentally different for girls and boys, I do believe that they are enacted differently by gender. As a key component of the emergent
self, gender and sexuality matter greatly for adolescents. And gender, in and of itself, is a performance that we engage in on a daily basis (West and Zimmerman 1987). As a result, the gendered performance is naturally embedded in the performance of the self on Facebook.

West and Zimmerman (1987) write that doing gender is a social phenomenon that is created and reproduced in our daily activities. In essence, gender is less of a descriptive characteristic than an action we undertake to signal who we are to others. They describe gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category,” which they define as fitting both the biological and social criteria of the gender (127). Similarly, Butler (1990) argues that gender is a “…kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing” (1). Calling upon Goffman’s notion of the performance, she writes that gender is not done alone, but rather always performed for others. This is interesting as it implies that gender requires a significant amount of attention to reproduce on a daily basis; in other words, gender is not something that just “is,” but rather something that must be consistently recreated and performed by the individual.1 We see this on Facebook in the gendered roles that participants enact in their images, such as the classic masculine jock/tough guy and the stylized femininity we see in Figures 4 and 5 below, both posted on Facebook by study participants.

1 This notion of gender as a fixed visible is standard in the early ‘doing gender” literature, but of course it is incomplete given that it does not take into account the ways in which individuals can manipulate the expression of their genders both physically and socially.
Gender research traditionally focused on the binary opposition between the ways that men and women shape and value their identities that can be seen in Erikson’s (1959) and Gilligan’s (1982; 1987) work (Thorne 1993). Gilligan’s emphasis was on creating a
singular female experience to contrast with a singular male experience, and in a sense she reduces her own work to a notion of a male versus female perspective. More recently however, Gilligan and others have amended this statement to suggest that males and females use a range of different gender strategies, including those associated with both the male and female perspective (Thorne 1993), which mirrors West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion of doing gender in specific social contexts. Thorne (1993) argues that the social interaction may be “simultaneously cooperative and competitive, self-assertive and oriented to others, and brash and vulnerable. And these qualities do not sharply divide by gender” (106). As a result, we most likely possess “multiple gender ideologies” (Thorne 1993: 106). While gender cannot be altered in each context, the way it is expressed can be contextual. Interestingly, the adolescents in my study negotiated the Facebook context by seeming to reaffirm the traditional gender scripts and roles. While it is certainly true that there is some flexibility, as girls do show some sports pictures and boys will show pictures in which they are dressed up for prom, for the most part the images that they showcase, particularly in profile pictures, emphasize traditional gender norms of hyper heterosexual masculinity and femininity.

Gender appears to be a construct in which traditional norms are vigilantly adhered to and policed by participants (Pascoe 2007). Based on my interview data I believe that this is because gender norms in adolescence are very important and narrowly defined. All participants reported that it was important to adhere to gender scripts to prove their hetero-normativity to their peers and went to great lengths to do so.
The performance aspect of gender may even influence the very basic descriptive differences between the ways men and women utilize social media. Fogel and Nehmad (2009) report that men are less choosy than women when it comes to who they friend and the private information they reveal on Facebook. Thus, gender may play a role in the content individuals make available on their Facebook pages, both in terms of the numbers of friends and the pictures and comments they post and receive. My research supports Fogel and Nehmad’s (2009) findings at least in part; the boys in the study were far more willing to share information about themselves and their beliefs through their status updates and comments; they revealed political ideologies, were alternately cruel and supportive of friends, and wrote more in general than the girls. I believe this may be connected to the ways in which masculinity is performed in adolescence through greater risk taking and general buffoonery. In contrast, the girls’ pictures are virtually identical and they write far fewer status updates, which they all described as intentional. The girls felt that the boys had more freedom in their comments and pictures, or at the very least, there is more variability allowed for boys, and therefore they felt more limited and perhaps censored.

Fogel and Nehmad (2009) also state that men are less choosy than women when it comes to friending people on Facebook. While I do not have any direct evidence to validate this, I did find that the girls in the study have, on average, more Facebook friends than the boys. I wonder whether Fogel and Nehmad’s (2009) findings may really be capturing gender norms at work; boys may appear to be less choosy because of the ways in which they articulate friendship ties as compared to girls. If women define the self, at
least in part, as a “self in relation” to others (Surrey 1980) then perhaps the ways in which girls describe their connections may make them sound more choosey, when in reality they are just more connected and are culturally allowed to be more thoughtful in describing their Facebook connections.

Social media also provides adolescents with more opportunities to interact with potential romantic partners, which may impact gender performativity. Research on adolescents’ use of instant messaging (IM) technology reveals that teens report far more communication with members of the opposite sex on IM than they do in person or over the phone (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, Shklovski 2006). This effect appears to be particularly significant for boys: “people of both sexes have a general preference for a female communication partner (e.g., Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991). IM is a technology that teenaged boys have taken advantage of to hold these cross-gender conversations. With IM, female teens talk most often to their female friends and only occasionally to male friends, while boys frequently talk to girls over IM” (Boneva et al. 2006: 649). Interestingly, teens rate IM as a “less psychologically close” form of communication, which may give them the freedom (or courage) to pursue conversations with potential partners that are more challenging than intimate face to face interactions (Boneva et al. 2006). Because of this, online communication may give adolescents a chance to rehearse these socially risky conversations and try out different approaches before attempting them face-to-face. Many participants mentioned connecting with the opposite sex through Facebook private messaging first in order to establish a connection and all agreed that this was preferable to initiating contact face to face as it felt less risky.
If gender is performed in such traditional ways on Facebook, it would make sense that there is an “erotic market” on Facebook much like the one that Hamilton (2007) and Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney (2006) documented on college campuses. Their research, along with Bogle’s (2008) work on the gendered standards of the “hookup culture,” suggests that females may use feminine and erotic gendered performances to enhance their social status amongst peers (Hamilton 2007; Armstrong et al. 2006). Images, such as Figure 6 below, posted by one of my sophomore female participants, suggest that the erotic market is alive and well on Facebook. In this way, Facebook probably functions in a similar way to the offline realities depicted by the above mentioned researchers in their work on college campuses.

Figure 6
Images like the one above are so terrifying to adults that I think we let this dominate our thinking on adolescent Facebook usage. This is part of the reason adults worry so much; teens spend hours on social media and then post images like the one above, which make us uncomfortable because of what we believe these pictures signal about their sexuality.

Yet, images like the one above are by no means the complete story. I will argue that while some of these surface images are provocative and potentially inappropriate, they belie work that teens do on Facebook, and it is indeed hard and thoughtful work, that is not as dangerous as a first glance at the image may lead us to believe. While many girls spoke about the power that boys possess when they choose to like their images, and their understanding that a like is confirmation that you are pretty, girls also talked about how nice it is, regardless of how well the picture does on Facebook, to see a beautiful image of yourself, a great and/or funny shot with friends, or an image that makes them feel proud. Indeed Carly, who posted the provocative picture above, also posted the following image (Figure 7) of her dancing.
Figure 7
When I asked Carly about this image she made a point of explaining that it was not about showing off her body, but rather her skill:

Carly: Yeah, I think at least when I post it the people who are gonna see it see it, but I feel like at some schools it’s like I’m gonna post it so everyone can see it…I dunno….It’s like for the dancing pictures I feel like…on Instagram I posted a dancing picture and it got a lot of likes, but that’s cause it was like a cool picture, like we were on Pointe and even if you’re not a dancer you’re gonna be like, that’s cool…

Me: It’s really hard…

Carly: Yeah.

Thus, while the erotic market as defined by Hamilton (2007) and Armstrong et al (2006) can be found on Facebook, it is by no means the sole function of Facebook to perpetuate it. However, a broader definition that considers erotic capital more broadly, encompassing charm and charisma in addition to appearance and sexuality (Hakim 2011), may be more applicable. While Carly and her friends clearly wanted to show that they look great in bikinis, it was also really important for her to be seen for her talent and ability to dance en Pointe. During the interview Carly talked extensively about how
important dance is to her; she attends an art school so that she can major in dance, which she loves, but recognizes all that she misses out on by being so focused on dance at such a young age. Thus, while Carly may participate in the erotic market, and I think it is a critical component of the gendered Facebook performance in some ways, it is not her whole Facebook story.

It is important to note that the majority of the gender research presented above emphasizes only hetero-normative gender strategies. Butler argues that gender should not be “reducible to hierarchical heterosexuality” (2004: 54) and to address this critique, I attempted to consider the ways in which non-hetero-normative behaviors play out online. This was a challenge, given both the medium and age group. Research on college students conducted by Zhao et al (2008) indicates that their participants do not reveal that they are gay or lesbian on Facebook; in spite of the fact that two participants told the researchers they are gay, neither participant is out on Facebook. This is not to imply that LGBT adolescents do not reveal their sexual orientation online, but rather that they may not choose to do so on Facebook. This was certainly true for my participants, all of whom conformed to traditional hetero-normative scripts. Information posted is not anonymous, but rather revealed to all Facebook friends, and potentially friends of friends depending on one’s privacy settings, and perhaps homosexuality is something that many adolescents would rather not declare on this social networking site. This may be because of the ways in which status is conferred through hetero-normative gender performances in adolescence. There are online social networking sites such as TrevorSpace, which are geared towards LGBT adolescents, and may provide a safer environment for gay teens
because they do not have to worry about their risk to social standing in this more accepting social context.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a socially constructed stage of the life course that is thought of as “that awkward period between sexual maturity and the attainment of adult role and responsibilities (Dahl 2004:9)”. Although researchers may debate the biological and psychosocial details about how this transitional process takes place, all agree that it is a time of heightened awareness of the self; “who am I” and “where do I fit in” are the two critical questions of adolescence. To navigate this process adolescents develop their personal fable, the narrative of the self that exists inside their minds. This personal fable is powerful as it provides the organizational system for our experiences; if a part of your personal fable is that you are a caring friend, you will approach your experiences with that framework in place. This fable evolves over time and plays a critical role in answering these two questions of adolescence. This self awareness is nothing new; however, what is new is the social media platform in which it can now be made public. When I started this research I thought that based on the biosocial research on cognitive development, teens would upload images in the moment without much forethought or judgment. While this does happen on occasion, in talking to my participants and observing their postings I found that for the most part they are very thoughtful about what they post and many of their images have a story of the self that they really want to tell. I believe the urgency and importance comes from the fact that many of their images are a visual presentation of their personal fables. Through Facebook they can work through
their narrative as it evolves and craft images to support their current emerging sense of self. And I would also argue that there is great value in observing your own visual interpretation; many talked about how important it was to see these images for themselves, how happy they felt to see a picture of a great memory or how beautiful they felt when they saw their own image on Facebook.

This is a story of adolescent Facebook use. Yet, the concepts, meanings, and stories presented here do not require Facebook to be relevant. Indeed the findings are applicable to any social media site that relies on images, cultivating friends or followers, and receiving feedback on the presentation. In spite of the concerns and negative media coverage of teen Facebook usage, the adolescents I interviewed are working hard on social media and this work really matters to them. This research seeks to present this work in their words—how images are selected, how these images fit into the narrative of the self, and what can be done with Facebook feedback on their personal fable. To do this required looking beyond the surface image to understand the story of why the image was selected and what it might mean for the teen. The next chapter will present the methods that I developed to address this facet of adolescent Facebook use.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

The social media ethnography that I developed for this research, including Facebook observation, image analysis and follow up interviews, is unique within the field of social media research. Although researchers in the late 1990s/early 2000s (the beginning of the Internet era) did work on new media ethnographies (Lindlof and Shatzer 1998; Hine 2000), this work was focused more generally on the internet as valid ethnographic source, in particular raising questions about how to conduct field research. Hine (2000) suggested that the internet could be viewed as both a cultural performance and a cultural artifact. More recently, several researchers such as Postill and Pink (2012) have addressed the challenges that arise from interacting with participants over social media sites and other methodological challenges such as archiving social media data in qualitative software programs. Interestingly the researchers question whether it is valid to study participants in only one social media context (i.e. only their Twitter, Facebook, etc). They argue that because people tend to “constantly criss cross a range of platforms” in their social media usage, and as such, looking only at their Twitter practices may not be completely representative of their social media experiences (10). I do agree with this point and think it is an important limitation of the study.

Given the methodological debates concerning social media ethnography and the lack of available data on young teens lived experience with Facebook, this work began as a grounded theory exercise, and I had no real sense of whether my findings would support the current theoretical frameworks in the field. However from the beginning I felt confident in these methods because I knew they would elicit a deeper understanding
of the Facebook experience in adolescence. Of particular note are the observation period and follow up interviews I conducted, during which each participant spoke about their Facebook images. While other researchers have done a combination of surveys and interviews, none have observed their Facebook images for extended periods of time and then asked participants to talk about the stories behind these pictures. This facet of the research, which really transformed this work into a social media ethnography, allowed me to document their decision making processes on Facebook, something that currently is not discussed in the sociological narrative on adolescent social media. It was during these interviews that I came to understand that they are thoughtful about their image selections because these images really mean something in their narrative of the evolving self. This insight is a central tenet of the emerging theory of technology and adolescent development that I present in this dissertation, and it is really from this methodological approach that I was able to arrive at this new, and I argue deeper, understanding of the adolescent social media experience that serves to expand upon the current narrative in the field.

**Methods Summary**

In this multi-method study I sought to examine whether and how, from their perspective, the work adolescents do on Facebook influences their presentation of the self and whether these effects are gendered. I focused my research on the visual images adolescents post and the feedback they receive on these images in the form of likes and comments. This research was guided by three interconnected questions:

1. What kind of self are adolescents crafting on Facebook?
2. How does Facebook impact the emerging sense of self-worth for this age group? This question was addressed through the following: (a) what kind of boundaries are enacted and how social boundaries are demarcated, (b) what kind of rules for behavior and how Facebook rule violations are policed and managed, and (c) how social categories of worth may be transmitted on Facebook and the effects this may have on the emerging sense of self.

3. Is the digital performance gendered on Facebook?

To address these research questions, I conducted a two-phased study. The first phase of research consisted of surveys and focus groups with 26 adolescents (aged 13-18). At the beginning of each focus group participants completed a short survey focusing on general social media usage, self-assessed psychological wellness and social connectedness, and health behaviors. In the second phase of the research I spent two weeks engaged in a social media ethnography, during which time I examined the 125 images participants posted and those in which they were tagged. I also observed all comments and likes these images generated during this time period. After the observation period I conducted follow up interviews with each participant to understand the stories of these images from the youths’ perspectives; really I was interested in two stories, the story that the image is intended to tell and the story of how the image ended up on Facebook.

This multi method approach allowed me the opportunity to observe adolescents’ Facebook postings in real time and also to speak with them to understand their motivation for postings and reflections on the feedback process. I believe that this method enabled me to get at the meanings behind the Facebook performances, and was therefore the best way to observe the presentation of the Facebook fable and the gendered nature of this performance. And perhaps most importantly, asking adolescents to tell me the stories of
their images enabled me to hear their perspective, thereby removing any adult judgments or notions I may initially have brought to the work.

The goal of this work is to present their voices; I wanted to hear their words to understand the time, stress, and attention they give to Facebook and what the experience truly means to them. Their language and stories are presented in the data and offer a more complicated and thoughtful perspective of the role of social media in their lives than the one currently depicted in the literature.

**Pilot Study**

About a year before I began my dissertation data collection, I did a pilot study with five adolescents (3 females, 2 males). Four of the five teens lived in the Boston area and one in New York City. For this pilot study I conducted open ended semi structured interviews with participants about their experiences on Facebook. In the second half of the interview they showed me some of their Facebook images and talked me through the decision to post them, the feedback they received, and their overall impression management work. At this point I was focused on Facebook as a marker of social status via likes and number of friends, however this pilot study was helpful in developing a working understanding of their Facebook actions and testing out the methods. Through the analysis of the pilot study data I realized that the really rich and innovative findings were emerging from the second half of the interviews when they spoke about their images. I developed phase two of the research study, the Facebook observation and follow up interviews, to capitalize on these findings. I received IRB approval (2850E) for this study in June 2012.
Recruitment Procedures

Adolescents had to meet the following eligibility requirements for study participation: 1) age between 13-18; 2) be a current high school student; and, 3) live in the Boston area. Recruiting participants to the study was a challenge from the start. While I had no trouble obtaining parental consent, it was more difficult getting adolescents to commit to a time and actually show up for the meetings. While my initial goal was to recruit participants from a variety of schools and backgrounds to represent a variety of voices and experiences, I spent three months trying to recruit this way without much success. I attempted to recruit via Facebook advertising, and posting flyers in coffee shops, stores, gyms, and local area high schools (Appendix A). I also asked adolescents I know to post flyers for me as well. However, with no economic incentive and perhaps more importantly no peer pressure, it was virtually impossible to get them to drive (or be driven) to a focus group with a total stranger. As a result, I amended my IRB protocol and was granted permission to offer financial incentives to participants, in the form of $20 gift certificates to Starbucks or Amazon, and to recruit participants through the snowball sampling technique (Neuman 2006:214). This proved to be far more effective in terms of recruitment, but does mean that I lost some of the participant diversity I initially sought.

Once I received IRB approval for snowball sampling, I used personal and professional connections I had to Boston area parents and parent communities, such as church groups and online parenting groups, to obtain initial access to the adolescent population (Appendix B). My recruitment strategy was to garner parental interest first,
believing that if the parents were interested in the study and knew me well enough through at least secondary connections, they might be more inclined to encourage their children to participate. I initially targeted 12 parents, of which eight responded and showed interest in the study. These eight parents (seven mothers, one father) completed the consent form and provided me with the cell phone number and/or email address for their child. I then reached out to these eight teens (five males and three females) and asked them to be the point person for a focus group and recruit 10-12 eligible participants, in the hopes of actually getting 6-8 teens, from their school or community.

**Study Sample**

Of the eight teenagers I contacted with to form focus groups, four (three female, one male) were able to recruit a sufficient number of participants. I was hoping to have more than one male group, particularly a younger male group, but I could not recruit within this age group, and as a result, their voices are notably absent in this work. While these group leaders were of great help, I was still dependent on teens actually showing up to the focus group with their consent forms, all of which means that the numbers of participants for the focus groups were very erratic. Of particular note are the third and fourth groups. The boy who worked to secure participants for my third focus group told me he had a “good size” group when we set the meeting, but up until the afternoon before we met he was unsure of how many boys would be there. The group, 13 in total, was significantly larger than I had expected and ideally it would have been better to have these boys divided into two focus groups. However they were all present at that moment and I feared that they might not show up a second time if I rescheduled some of them, so
I made the decision to work with the larger group. The reverse was true in the fourth focus group of young ninth grade girls, at which I expected six girls and only four showed up at the library, one of whom did not actually have her own Facebook, but was eager to participate and ended up being a very knowledgeable third party informant. While I would have liked to recruit more young participants (ages 13-16), both male and female, I spent 11 months recruiting these participants, and made the decision that it was in my best interest to move forward with the analysis at that point. While I will discuss the study limitations in the concluding chapter, I note here that when I made the decision to stop actively recruiting participants I felt that I was not hearing new information, and therefore, with the exception of younger males, I did not feel that more interviews would necessarily improve the richness of my data. Ultimately the study sample consists of 26 participants, 13 male and 13 female. Table 1 includes a breakdown of the focus groups by age and number of participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group #/Gender</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13-15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Focus Group Descriptives

The advantage of the slow recruitment process was that for the most part I was able to work with one group at a time—from focus group to follow up interviewer. This made the observation period more manageable, although there was some overlap between
the boys’ follow up interviews and the younger girls’ focus group and image observation. All participants completed a consent/assent form (Appendices C-E) and those under age 18 brought a parental consent form to the focus group. Consent was obtained for the focus group and interview data as well as the image collection. I also obtained consent to utilize the images in my written work. There was no attrition during the course of the study and $20 gift certificates were sent electronically to participants after the completion of the follow up interview. One participant declined to take the financial incentive. I also provided pizza and soda at the focus groups as an added participation incentive.

**Participant Demographics**

All participants (n=26) attended Boston area high schools at the time of the study. The females ranged in age from 13-18 at the time of joining the study, and were in 9th through 12th grade. The boys ranged in age from 17-18 and were all in 12th grade. The girls were from five Boston area schools, including two private schools, two public schools, and one charter school. The boys all attend the same single sex private school. Two female participants identified as Asian and one male participant identified as Black or African American. All other participants (n=23) identify as White.

**Survey Data**

At the beginning of the focus groups participants were asked to complete an anonymous survey (Appendix F) about their social media usage as well as their perceived physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Some survey questions were designed by me to address the specific research hypotheses, while others were adapted from the 2009 Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance Systems questionnaire (for risk behavior questions)
and the 2013 Pew Teens and Social Media Report (for technology related questions). Survey questions were pilot tested for understanding and length by four adolescents uninvolved in this study prior to the focus groups. The goal of the survey was to capture self assessed well being and risk behavior in order to address some of the standard hypotheses in the field such as the link between Facebook use and low self-esteem or increased risk behaviors. It also gave me greater insight into the social and emotional well being of my participants, which was a useful reference point for follow up interviews. All participants completed the survey.

**Focus Group Data**

Facebook is fundamentally about social interactions and therefore I included focus groups in my research because they afforded me with the opportunity to hear how adolescents talk about Facebook in a social context of same age peers, similar to those with whom they interact on Facebook (Patton 2002). Focus groups are particularly useful when studying adolescents as they can provide insight into participants’ own “language and concepts” (Tiggemann, Gardiner, and Slate 2000: 646). This was critical because, based on the five interviews I conducted as pilot research for this study I realized that the ways adolescents talk and think about Facebook is very different from how I initially conceptualized it because of our generational and experiential differences with social media. In addition to the new insights the focus group provided, the language I picked up while listening to them talk to each other exposed me to terms—such as “bathroom mirror selfies” to describe groups of girls taking pictures using the bathroom mirror, “duck face selfies” to describe the puckered lip shots that girls take and post, and “pro
pic” to describe a profile picture—were helpful in developing both rapport and cultural cache with participants in the follow up interviews.

Focus groups also allow insight into “not only what people think but how they think and why” (Kitzinger 1995: 299). I did not have to ask many questions in the focus groups to keep the conversation moving, which afforded me the opportunity to listen for the deeper meanings and moments of clarity and confusion in their Facebook experiences. Focus groups allow for the “co-construction of meaning” (Tiggemann et al 2000: 646), and the opportunities for participants to question each other (Neuman 2006), both of which were critical for this research given that so little work has been done on the adolescent Facebook experience. I began this research assuming that teens do not do a lot of self reflection before they post, and as a result, I thought that the focus group experience would provide the opportunity for them to develop this meaning together. The focus groups did not need to serve this purpose as I found that teens were extremely self-aware and conscious of their Facebook selves; however, the focus groups did provide teens with an opportunity to test out and confirm the unspoken social rules of Facebook, which will be described in Chapter 4.

The focus groups were conducted in person in private rooms in public spaces, such as a conference room at Boston University or a reserved conference room at a local library. Excluding the time for introductions and completion of the survey, the three girls’ focus groups were all about an hour long. The boys’ group was 30 minutes, again not including survey completion, due to the fact that many boys had to return to school for classes. Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured approach (Patton,
2002: 342), and I followed the guidelines outlined by Neuman (2006) and Patton (2002) for leading a focus group, which describe the interviewer as facilitator who allows for communication between the participants. (Appendix G) Because I wanted to learn what was important to them, I asked very open ended questions and allowed lots of conversation between participants. I took notes during the focus group and the groups were also audio-recorded. After the first two groups, I revised the focus group protocol to be more reflective of the particular language I was hearing. I asked about the amount of time they spend on Facebook, how they spend their time on the site, their opinions about certain common image types (i.e. selfies, bikini images, or party pictures), and how they make sense of the feedback they receive.

**Facebook Image Observation**

Upon completion of the focus group, I examined participants’ Facebook images over the course of two weeks in order to study both the content of the picture and any subsequent comments and likes posted by Facebook friends in real time. I created a dummy Facebook page for each focus group, which included only my image (so they would know who they were friending) and my Boston University contact information. I made a separate page for each group so that participants across groups would not be able to access each other’s information. Initially I worried about whether the teens would actually accept the friend request, but all did so within 24 hours, most almost immediately, which indicates the frequency with which they access social media content. Another interesting thing to note is that when I friended the 13 boys, all of whom accepted in 24 hours, I immediately received a friend request to my dummy page from a
girl who is unknown to me, but is Facebook friends with many of these boys. I did not accept the request, but note it as it clearly indicates the ways in which social influence and networking can take place on social media.

I observed only Facebook images and the likes and comments specifically related to the images posted during the two week time period. I did not examine status updates or any other Facebook content. I made this decision for several reasons: First, the images seemed to present a different type of communication on social media because of their visual nature. While I am sure that status updates do connect to the visual story, I was not sure of exactly how this would play out. Second, in the focus groups and in the survey data it was clear that participants use Facebook primarily to post and look at images. I wanted to capture this emphasis in the study. Finally, and most practically, given the large number of images participants posted it seemed more reasonable to focus solely on these rather than extend the process.

All images that were posted during the observation period were part of the analysis. I copied all images into a word document labeled with each participant’s pseudonym. At the end of the 2 week observation period I defriended the participants. For four of the male participants I extended the observation period by an extra week due to the fact that the Facebook observation period began right as the semester was ending and many were very busy with exams, sports tournaments and formals and did not have time to post a lot of content. During the observation period I had no direct contact with participants beyond scheduling the follow up interview.
Going in to this phase of the research I was concerned that participants may alter their behavior on Facebook knowing that I was observing them. Perhaps they would tear down the images or post less because they knew I was looking at them. While there is no way to be certain this did not occur, I did examine pictures posted prior to my two week observation period as a validity check on the data. These images are not included in the analysis, but their behavior did not reveal any areas of concern. As I subsequently learned, the powerful norm of the authentic self on Facebook made it highly unlikely that they could alter their performance in significant ways. However, it is important to know for certain whether participants chose to post or not post certain images during this time.

**Follow Up Interviews**

The overarching goal of the follow up interviews was to see whether and how the logic of their Facebook actions matches up with their internal development of a personal narrative. All participants (26) agreed to a follow up interview in person. Interviews took place at public locations convenient to the participants, such as Starbucks, local public libraries, and a quiet pizza place near the boys’ school. There was a clear protocol for the first half of the interviews that asked general questions about their day to day Facebook experiences such as how they interpret likes and whether and how the Facebook experience is fun or stressful (Appendix H). In the second half of the interview I focused on the images that were selected for review. I asked them simply to “tell me the story of this picture” as I wanted to understand both the image and the decision making process involved in its postings. This approach was derived from Becker’s (2003) claim that one important consideration of visual sociology should be to analyze how the
image came to be. I adapted this approach to address both the story of the image and the story of how it ended up on Facebook. After they described the story, I then asked follow up questions about their reactions to the image, the responses their images generated, and how they felt about these responses.

In the interviews with girls from the second and fourth focus groups I showed them four Facebook images from two female participants in the first focus group to assess how they judge other females’ images. The faces in the images were blurred to ensure anonymity. The first two images (Figures 8 and 9) were shown together and are representative of the bikini shots I viewed during the observation period.
I learned in the focus groups and through image collection that the bikini pictures are almost required images for this group of teen girls. Yet in spite of their frequency, bikini shots were often referenced by both boys and girls in the groups in a judgmental way. While these two images both represent bikini shots, I was curious to see if they would interpret the tone or message of each image differently or whether all bikini pictures are viewed similarly. I felt that these images, as representations of the bikini shots that are everywhere, would give me insight into my research question about the gendered performance of the self on Facebook. Before I showed the images, I asked participants to “imagine you see this image in your newsfeed. What would it tell you about the person who posted it?” In addition, I asked every participant to guess which girl in the picture on the left posted the image.
The second set of images I showed the girls highlighted potential risk behaviors. Again, all images were blurred to ensure anonymity. These images were selected to test how teens think about these images, and those who posted them (Figures 10 and 11). The images were selected because one is a very obvious image of smoking possibly cigarette or drug use while the other is much more subtle; in the second image you would have to look very closely to see that they are holding plastic red Solo cups, which I learned in the focus groups are commonly used at teen parties for alcohol and in photographs they subtly signal alcohol use to other teen viewers.

Figure 10
I included these four pictures because I wanted participants to speak about the same images to compare how they describe them and what, if any, meanings they attach to them. It also served as a check on my coding schema as it ensured I was reading the images in a way that was representative of their thinking. I was not able to show images to the boys because they were all part of the same focus group and I felt it would be unethical to ask them to talk about a boy they know from school. As a result, this component is absent from the boys’ data. I do not think that this affects the strength of my data as the major finding, that girls’ analyses of others’ images were remarkably similar, seems likely to hold for boys given what I learned about the Facebook rules.

It is important to note that for some male participants, who post far fewer images in general, occasionally I asked about an image that they did not post directly, but were tagged in instead. When a Facebook friend tags them in the picture it appears as an image in the newsfeed of the participant and the person who uploaded and tagged the image. I believe these tagged images are relevant images for this analysis for two
reasons: 1) the boys’ receive notification from Facebook that they have been tagged in
the picture and have means to remove the image or untag themselves, so allowing it to
remain on their Facebook is a decision making process in and of itself, and 2) the boys
made it very clear in the focus group that it is considered feminine to take and post
pictures and reported that they rely on girls to post for them. As such, they are complicit
and perhaps even depend on the tagging process in some ways to get images. None of
these images, both the ones they take and the ones they are tagged in, just happen to
them.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed through multiple methods incorporating both direct
analysis in Stata and Nvivo, and time for reflection, listening to the interviews, and
analytic memoing. The quantitative data were analyzed in STATA for basic descriptives
and all qualitative data were coded in Nvivo. The data analysis followed a six step
process: 1) I wrote memos at each data gathering point; 2) I then combined the method-
specific memos (i.e. all focus groups together, all image coding together, etc) into larger
theoretical memos that were discussed in depth with my committee chair, Dr. Rieker; 3)
from these memos I developed two separate codebooks, the first for coding the interviews
and the second for coding the images; 4) after initial coding of five participants’ images
and three interviews, the codebooks were revised to reflect new understandings; and 5)
all interviews and images were coded; and 6) matrices were created in NVivo to examine
the frequency with which the codes were used by both age and gender of participants.
Other matrices were created to examine the frequency with which certain codes were used together.

**Analytic Memoing**

At every point in the data collection and analysis I engaged in analytic memo writing (Saldaña, 2009, p.33). After each focus group I wrote a memo about the overall themes that emerged, important language/terms that were being used, and particular moments from the focus group I wanted to reference for follow up in the interviews. After the image gathering, I created a memo of my overall reflections, noting the types of images that occurred frequently, images that linked directly to comments in the focus groups, and anything that suggested a gendered performance. I also created memos after each follow up interview to note my reflections in a manner similar to the focus group memos and used these memos to refer back to findings from the focus groups for validity. In NVivo I also kept a memo log for each participant throughout the coding process. I used this as an opportunity to record things of particular interest like great quotes, word usage, and most importantly reoccurring themes.

**Data Preparation and Readiness**

All interviews and focus groups were conducted by me. I transcribed two of the four focus groups and 12 of the 26 interviews and listened to and verified the work done by the professional transcriber. I inputted all survey data into Excel and then uploaded it to Stata. I created all dummy and categorical variables to conduct the crosstabs and
frequencies. I uploaded all interview data and images into Nvivo and created separate Nvivo projects for the images, interviews, and focus group data. I also created a separate internal folder within the image project for the profile pictures as I wanted to analyze these separately. I initially included them in the general coding, but as I got further in my interviewing and image collection, it became clear that because these images are the bulk of adolescents’ work on Facebook as they constitute the first impression, they should be analyzed separately.

Survey Data Analysis

As soon as the survey data was prepared I conducted an initial descriptive analysis of the data. This involved nothing more than basic frequencies of the social media, social connectedness, and health behaviors questions. This very simple analysis was done just to serve as an insight into my participants’ behaviors and thinking. Once I was further along in my qualitative analysis of the images and interview data I went back to the survey results and ran crosstabs to see if the relationships that were beginning to emerge in the qualitative findings were supported in the survey results. For example, in interviews with participants I realized that mean behavior online could derail the developing self. To examine this further, I ran a crosstab of the variables about social connectedness and experiencing meanness online. Other relationships were tested in a similar way.
Focus Group Data Analysis

The focus group data was analyzed first as I felt that these findings would help shape both the image and interview coding schemas. As mentioned above, I created reflective memos immediately follow the focus groups (Saldaña, 2009) and discussed my findings with my major advisor. I used these notes to guide the selection of the images shown to the girls in the interviews and to develop the interview protocol. I did not code the focus groups in Nvivo as the purpose of these meetings was to inform the rest of the data. Although these groups were not included in the coded data, they were essential to the creation of an effective interview protocol and codebook, as learning their language helped to foster their trust in me and the research. The focus groups were all extremely lively, and I think participants relished the opportunity to really explain what they are doing without the adult lecturing them about the horrors of social media. They told me that this was their experience with educators and parents, and it was clear that they were excited to really explain it and be the authority with me. I feel that this gave me more cache with them in the follow up interviews.

I did craft theoretical memos based on the themes that emerged from the focus groups; I created separate data memos for each focus group and then created one overarching theoretical memo that sought to address and reframe some of my initial hypotheses. For example, the notion of thinking of the surface presentation as the “highlights reel” came from this process and was subsequently tested in the follow up interviews.
Image Analysis

I initially copied all images and comments and recorded the number of likes the image received into a Word document. This data was organized by participant identification codes. Because I was using a grounded theory strategy, I did not want to be too selective in the initial culling of images. I did not include status updates or images that were shared as both were beyond the scope of this research. After I completed the image retrieval I then selected 4-6 images for each participant to discuss in the interviews. In very few cases did I get to all six images in the course of the interview; the average was four images per participant. The images for interview follow up were selected based on the following criteria:

1) Their representativeness in the sample. If a participant had 6 prom pictures posted during the course of the two week period, I was sure to select one for discussion.

2) The current profile picture was always selected because of the early focus group finding that the profile picture is the most important for creating the first impression.

3) Any images that depict or hint at the key initial hypotheses of the research (in particularly gender performance, symbolic boundaries, or signaling risk behaviors).

4) Any image that was particularly interesting or required further explanation.

While so many images were virtual replicas of other images posted (by the
same participant and others), every so often one would stand out as being
different. These images were always selected.

The codebook was reviewed by my major advisor and then tested on five
participants’ images, after which time I refined the coding categories (Appendix I). I
coded all images available, unless the same image was posted twice (a frequent
occurrence given that participants can also be tagged in other’s pictures). Although I
coded the profile pictures in a separate file, I utilized the same coding schema for them. I
decided to chunk the coding by participant, meaning that I coded one participant’s images
and interview before moving on to the next person. I chose this approach rather than
coding all the images at once as I believed that it would strengthen the validity of the
interview coding. There were so many images available to code; some girls had upwards
of 30 pictures posted, that I did not feel that looking at all the images together would
allow me to delve deeply into each participant’s stories.

I coded the images before the interview to ensure that the image coding was a first
impression coding; I did not want to be influenced by what the participant said about his
or her picture when coding, but rather to code images as if I were viewing them for the
first time. This was important to me because I did not want to be influenced by the
rationale they provided in the interviews.

In developing the image content analysis I relied heavily on work in visual
sociology guided by Radley and Bell (2007), Bell (2010), and Harper (2012). Radley and
Bell (2007) argue that images “are important because telling one’s own experience –
whether in words or pictures – remains a central source of social support” (369). As
such, they advocate the sociological examination of visual images as an extension of one’s narrative, as they tell the viewer who the person is; thus, we study the image as a mechanism for understanding the individual (Radley and Bell 2007; Bell 2010). If images play this role in our lives, it is logical to assume that adolescents use their Facebook to show their “own experiences” on Facebook. I used this rationale for developing codes that emphasized the story of the self. For the more general context analysis such as pose and tone as well as the gender coding, I utilized Goffman’s (1979) *Gender Advertisements* as a framework.

Because there is little work done on teens’ image making in the field of visual sociology from which to draw upon, I also utilized the “Visual Art Coding Schema” developed by Project Zero at Harvard to code student photography from high school literary magazines. Although my participants were not working as photographers for the most part, this framework was helpful in thinking about how to describe and evaluate adolescents’ photographs. Using Goffman and Project Zero’s coding as a guide, I set up five code categories: 1) general description, which focus on the actual content of the photography; 2) composition of the photograph and editing; 3) the number of likes the images received; 4) relationship closeness, which captures whether the people in the images are close together/touching or distant; and 5) tone which captures the feel of the image as funny, flattering, sexual, or youthful just to name a few. These concepts were created and defined through a combination of language/description I heard in the focus groups (i.e. in a girl’s group they talked about “flattering bikini shots” and described what they meant by this. I used their terminology of “flattering” for the code category and
tried to best sort their images based on their descriptions. It is important to note that because I was not able to talk to participants about all of their images in the interview, at times I had to use my own interpretation of their images. Again, I was always guided in my interpretive work by their language and descriptions. After refining the codebook, I ended up with a total of 37 codes within these five coding categories.

After coding was completed I created conceptually organized matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994) in NVivo that allowed me to examine codes by participants. I first created an overall matrix of all participants and codes and then created separate matrices for age and gender of the participant. The conceptual matrices also allowed me to group the images by theme, which gave me the chance to examine all of the pictures coded as friendship or body images together. From this, I could see commonalities, participants who were outliers, and determine related codes. For example, through this analysis I realized that most of the images coded as flattering were individual, not group shots with the exception of young girls who often coordinate flattering photos with close friends via the photo shoots. I did this by asking Nvivo to output all the flattering images. From this data I could see which participants had images coded as flattering and then look for commonalities amongst these images (i.e. flattering images are mostly individual shots, they involve posing, etc). I could also use the matrices to compare coding for different participants. For example, while Michelle has 9 pictures coded as flattering, Rebecca has none (again using their term/description coupled with my interpretation of a few images we did not discuss). Not only was there a difference in the number of images available for coding by these two participants, with Michelle posting far more than Rebecca, the
girls were posting inherently different pictures. A final matrix was created just for the profile picture images (n=24) to see if certain codes are used more frequently in these most important images. All profile pictures were analyzed together in one matrix and then were divided by gender.

Coding of Interview Data

Before I began coding I read through my interviews in their entirety to capture the overall arc of the narrative. The codebook for the interview data was fairly detailed because, although I utilized a grounded theory approach initially, at this point in the analysis I had already developed the salient themes through the focus group analysis and image observation. As a result, I was able to use “focused coding” (Charmaz 2006) on the interview data (Appendix J). After each round of interview coding I wrote notes in a coding memo in order to think through the codes in further detail; I used this time to note distinctions or propose combining codes into broader categories.

After all the interviews were coded in NVivo I used the software again to create conceptual matrices of the coded data. I first created a general data matrix that included all participants and codes. This initial matrix was a literal count of the codes by participant. For example, in the matrix I could see that I used the code for rules that are specific to girls on Facebook (Code: Rules-Girls) 90 times in my interview coding. This quick count allowed me to see which codes I used most often as well as the variability of the code by category (interestingly boys talked about girls’ rules more often than girls) and participant (Jake, the boy who shut down his Facebook due to bullying was the only
boy who never mentioned rule violation in the interview). I also sorted the matrices by age (13-16 and 17-18 to capture the 9th/10th grade distinction from the 11th/12th grade that participants mentioned in the focus groups) and gender. At this point I realized that three codes were not used, and they were removed from the matrices. I then used Nvivo to import the actual coded data into the matrices. This enabled me to read from the actual interview data to see what each participant sounds like on that coding theme (see Appendix K for sample appearance coded output). For example, I was able to read each girl’s comments on appearance, which allowed for a broad analysis (i.e. how do all girls in general talk about appearance) as well as an in-depth analysis of each participant (i.e. how does this one girl speak about appearance over the course of the interview). I was then able to compare this data to the boys’ coding for appearance.

When writing up the interview data as evidence in the subsequent chapters I relied heavily on the work of Paget (1983). In this piece, Paget conveys the importance of allowing the richness and complexity of my participants’ voices to shine through in the three empirical chapters. Paget presents interview data in its most complete and raw form as she believes that “as a series of questions and replies on selected discourse topics, in-depth interviews systematically create knowledge. Their form and content, when preserved, examined and displayed, demonstrate that process (1983: 69).” Paget’s thinking on this encouraged me to include the interview questions and in some cases longer excerpts of the exchanges between a participant and me, as a way to present both the context in which the answer was given as well as the participant’s language stops and starts as they work to explain their decision making and thought process. While this can
be a bit more challenging to read at times. I did not want to edit their language too much as this is the first chance we have to hear their reflections.

**Study Rigor**

This research introduces new methods into the study of social media use. It is broadly a social media ethnography, which has not been utilized in any substantive way in the sociological literature. This is exciting work, but admittedly these methods have been largely untested by others in the field. Because of this concern, several measures were taken to enhance study rigor: First, I purposely selected a variety of methods to allow for methodological triangulation. The survey data allowed participants to respond anonymously, the focus group data captured the consensus of the group, and the emergence of their voice; the image analysis allowed me to engage in the process of evaluating the impression management work as they do it in real time, and the follow up interviews provided for more personal follow ups on the images and as a check on my content analysis. In essence, each phase in the data collection and analysis served as a validity test on the methods used in the next phase; the focus groups helped shape the codebooks and the image analysis helped form the interview questions.

Second, I engaged in a great deal of memoing and debriefing with my committee chair, Dr. Rieker to ensure that I was not veering from the data. Dr. Rieker read all of my memos and served as a sounding board to all of the theoretical and methodological developments along the way to ensure that I was being true to what was actually in the data. This was invaluable for me as these methods, particularly the participant observation of images, have not been conducted before on social media. Finally, through
this process of debriefing and analytic memoing, I made sure to maintain awareness that I was “present in the study from every phase” (Weiss 1994: 211; Paget 1983). I spent a great deal of time considering the power dynamics inherent in both interviewing adolescents, who may want to provide an adult with the “right answer” rather than the truth, and in being a female interviewer. For example, it was evident to me very early on in the process that the teenage boys were going to be more forthcoming than I expected and in many cases more so than the girls. After reflecting about this I came to the conclusion that they relished the chance to be the authority on a topic that I was seemingly not clued into in the ways that they are, and likely speaks to inherent male-female power dynamics. As I cannot alter these factors, all I could do was to reflect throughout the data analysis process about how my presence in the data may impact the findings.

These nascent methods are a contribution to the sociological study of social media. While more work needs to be done to apply these methods more broadly; I believe that the rich findings that will be presented in the next three empirical chapters are largely the result of this new approach to social media ethnography. The next chapter will begin with the first piece of the Facebook presentation—creating and selecting images for the public presentation.
CHAPTER FOUR: PRODUCING THE HIGHLIGHT REEL AND THE REAL ME

Adolescents do not come to Facebook as blank slates, ready to create or shape a performance of the self. Rather they bring their offline world with them. Twenty four of the 26 participants reported that Facebook is integrated into their daily lives and said that they do not see Facebook as separate from the everyday offline life. Interestingly, the two females who said they view Facebook as a separate online reality were the ones who posted the most revealing pictures, both in terms of the revealing images of the body and risk behaviors. But aside from these two cases, participants are not using Facebook to have anonymous conversations or create an alternate persona. Facebook does not allow them to break free from the social constraints of day to day life; because they bring their offline experiences, peer group, and social status to Facebook, their challenges and strengths offline become their challenges and strengths online.

What is different however is that Facebook allows teens to make their personal fable visible to their “friends” through images. Facebook becomes the visual representation of the emergent self; a representation that we hope aligns with the story of the self we internalize. This process of presenting the fable and determining what gets highlighted is very strategic. And the Facebook technology affords them time for this strategic work. Because they manage Facebook on their own terms, it gives teens the time to think through and craft the version of the self that is both authentic and appeals to others. While the teens in the study do of course pick the most flattering and exciting images to show on Facebook, images that comprise their “highlights reel,” these images are not less authentic or important to the teen’s development of the self. Indeed all
participants reported that their images are representative of who they are and stated that authenticity is an important criterion for selecting images. What is important here is not what value judgments we project onto their images, but rather the fact that they view these images as authentic and meaningful.

In this chapter I will show how teens use Facebook technology to construct a visual personal fable. Through the use of images and interview data I will argue that adolescents construct a “highlights reel” self on Facebook that conjures Goffman’s (1959) notion of impression management. Although I will go on to argue in subsequent chapters that this surface self presentation is meaningful, the image typologies that will be presented in this chapter may not inherently look meaningful to the reader. I am beginning my analysis with this “highlights reel” because that is where they begin this developmental work on Facebook. In some ways, the images that get depicted in the surface self are the manifest functions (Merton 1957) of Facebook as they see it; their Facebook actions start with the initial goal of posting images to highlight the surface self. And it is the surface self presentation, full of bikini pictures, muscle/jock pictures, and partying pictures, that garners the most attention in the literature. As a result, the surface self presentation warrants a significant amount of attention in this dissertation. However, the work that they do on Facebook does not end there; if readers focus only on the manifest functions of Facebook as they are presented in this chapter, they will miss the complexity and meaning embedded in these images. The latent functions (Merton 1957) of Facebook will be explored in subsequent chapters, but the goal of this chapter is to
describe the surface self presentation on Facebook, with particular emphasis placed on the all important profile pictures.

**The Online Personal Fable**

Facebook gives teens the ability to construct an online visual representation of the fable they are developing in their minds. The visual aspect of this fable presentation is important; it is one thing to act in accordance with your fable, but another to select images to support or enhance the story. For the visual presentation adolescents have to decide what types of images are representative of the self and then be able to ensure that these images are available. Teens post pictures that represent pieces of their personal story and these images have power because of this. Although not all images are deeply meaningful for them, when images do touch on aspects of their personal fable, participants spoke about them in a way that indicated that the visual was more than just a nice picture of them. Beruk, an 18 year old male participant posted the following picture of himself, anxiously waiting to hear about acceptance to an elite university (Figure 12).
He posted the image on his timeline after he learned of his acceptance. It received 117 likes, which for the boys in this study was an incredibly high number of likes (average was around 5 likes for male participants). Beruk captioned this picture “Yesterday…Waiting to hear back from [Ivy League School]……Its not like I was nervous or anything.” This self-reflective caption shows that Beruk is willing to share his emotions and vulnerabilities, but it also serves to highlight his success. And importantly he waits to post the image until after he is accepted. But as the interview progressed it was clear that this “highlight reel” moments was very meaningful for Beruk. While anyone would likely be nervous waiting for a college acceptance, Beruk’s picture is important to him because of the ways that it connects to his story of the self.

**Beruk:** I had a status before I posted that, that was talking about like, ‘cause I wasn’t born here, I was born in Ethiopia.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.
Beruk: And like it’s something that’s like very rare for somebody to be able to go and do that [getting into an elite college]. And like my socioeconomic class is like one of the lowest in like the school.

Interviewer: Right.

Beruk: And so like it’s difficult for a person like me to get into a school like this.

Interviewer: Of course, yeah.

Beruk: And it takes a lot of work and I worked really hard for it so I posted a status like, talking about how my parents brought me here 12 years ago, yada yada and I got like 600 something likes on it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beruk: And I posted this picture because it represented like the feeling. Yeah ‘cause pictures speak a lot of words.

Interviewer: Yeah I would agree.

Beruk: I wanted to share that.

In this brief interview excerpt Beruk highlights his immigrant status and his socioeconomic class as obstacles that he has overcome to earn admission to this school. A critical component of his fable is achievement in the face of challenge and it is clear that he wants people to see his success in light of his story. For Beruk, this image is not just signaling “I got into a great school,” it also says that “I got into a great school in spite of many obstacles.” And perhaps most pointedly, many obstacles his classmates do not face. As he says, “pictures speak a lot of words” and for him this image “represented like the feeling” of his inner narrative.

Beruk is using this image and story to highlight the uniqueness of both his achievement and personal story (Elkind 1967). What is interesting about the image is that its connection to his fable is not immediately obvious. While the image and caption
make it clear that it is a depiction of a student nervous about college acceptance, one would have to know him fairly well to understand the link to his fable about the hard work it took for him, as a child of immigrants who did not grow up with money to get here; as he states, “And it takes a lot of work and I worked really hard for it…” This picture means something to him and even if not all of his Facebook friends readily understand it, what matters to Beruk is that it establishes his story of hard work, perseverance, and achievement in context. However, the 117 likes he received suggest that a great number of his peers did understand and appreciate it as well.

Thinking of their Facebook in this way challenges the popularly held notion that adolescents post social media content with very little thought for what it may mean or the consequences. I do have a few examples of pictures that were posted with very little forethought, however most of these were reported to be posted under the influence of alcohol and none were selected for the prominent profile picture. And, as I will argue in the following chapter, while the initial posting may have been rash, the choice to keep these pictures, which can easily be removed or untagged, is a highly thought out and strategic choice to signal certain behaviors, friendships or even aspects of the emerging self.

**Externalizing the Fable**

Used in this way, personal fable theory, as presented by Elkind (1967) and others must be altered to account for the relational aspect that is becoming critical to the fable’s ongoing construction on social media. While none of the theorists would suggest that one’s fable is created in a social vacuum, they did largely think of the personal fable as a
story that exists in one’s mind. However, posting images that represent aspects of the fable on Facebook means that to a certain extent, one’s story is shared and then reacted to, via comments and likes, by one’s peers. In many ways, this makes it a more thoughtful yet vulnerable articulation of the personal fable. To use Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) term, Facebook has created a platform to externalize the personal fable online. This externalization process fundamentally changes both the construction and meaning of the personal fable and may even influence the conceptualization of the self. Having a visual representation of the personal fable on social media means that it can be accessed repeatedly, at home or with friends, which allows for review and adjustment, and over time this “micro-evidence” (Collins 2000) of self presentation may be internalize by the individual. While face to face interactions can be messy and awkward for teens, Facebook allows for a controlled and strategized presentation.

These two factors make the online personal fable work very appealing for teens and may explain the time and effort spent creating and updating it their Facebook. With the exception of one male participant, they all spoke about the time they spent gathering images and selecting which ones would be used. When this is coupled with the frequency with which they check Facebook (87 percent said two or more times a day), it suggests a significant degree of emotional investment these teens make in Facebook. This is not to diminish the time and energy they devote to the offline presentation. Indeed the online and offline presentations are in constant dialogue and mutually reinforce one another through the personal fable. Whether on or offline, the development of the personal fable in adolescence is a dynamic process of starts, stops, and changes. It
is not a linear path that results in the creation of the self, but rather the development of a story that evolves as it is repeatedly externalized and internalized over time. The opportunity Facebook provides to create a visual presentation of that work though cannot be underestimated. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to first explain how participants reported navigating the development of the public personal fable through impression management work on Facebook.

**Goffman and the Front Stage Presentation**

Goffman’s (1959) front stage dramaturgy offers an interesting lens through which to examine the personal fable work on Facebook. While Goffman’s front stage referred to face to face interactions performed in social contexts, social media technology has created a new online front stage made up of the visual images posted. To use Berger and Luckmann’s terminology, a teen’s Facebook is the heavily managed externalization of the personal fable. Whether online or offline, teens do not present everything in their front stage performances. None of the teens intentionally showed their failures, worries, or fears on Facebook, but then again they probably try to minimize this offline as well. In a few cases some of the boys would share an academic challenge, but it was reframed as a hilarious joke, such as one boy who used a low grade on a Chemistry test to crown himself “Jeff Silver Chem God” in a status update, which was well received by his male peers. And, based on the Facebook gender norms that allow for high levels of male idiocy, it is not even clear that this low grade would constitute a failure for him.

But in general, the focus is on creating the performance that will highlight the “best” parts of your personal fable. As one 12th grade boy described it, “I always think of
it as like someone else’s like, it’s their highlight reel, that they’re showing you.” This idea, that the images that teens select are a “highlights reel” of their stories is compelling and links well to Goffman’s notion of the front stage performance; we do this “highlights reel” for all of our performances irrespective of the whether they take place online or offline. It is important to note however that the performance is not generic, but rather that Goffman’s concept acknowledges both the specificity and generalizability of the performance.

The Facebook front stage work is focused on three key components: profile pictures, your related but less significant photo albums, and the number of friends and likes you have. These are the things that other teens can see instantly and essentially they signify Facebook self worth. Ultimately, this work has two audiences: the poster, who works to create and post images to cultivate a visual representation of the self narrative, and the Facebook friends, who use the images to make judgments about the person. The images and the likes they receive come to dominate the surface work teens do on Facebook because both can be used to assess social status; in all four of the focus groups teens reported that they could comfortably assess a person’s social status by the number of likes they had. As one 12th grade girl remarked, “But also in the group I’ve noticed other people who are like less cool, they might like, even if they post something, like less people would like it and no one would really comment on it.” She suggests that the “less cool” kids in her class have a different degree of social interaction on Facebook, and therefore, she felt confident being able to judge their social status based on the ways in which others interact with their Facebook in the form of likes. Image subject matter is
also indicative of status, as popular teens can post with more kids and at more fun activities. One 12th grade girl said “It’s more like they might, they might post, I mean it depends on the person but they might post stuff, they might post like a big group of girls together” implying that sheer quantity of peers in an image can be indicative of status. This component of status has been well documented on Facebook, but it is important to mention here because adolescents are fully aware that Facebook showcases their status. However, it is important to note that none of my participants believe that social status can be created on Facebook, in spite of one’s best effort to create a “highlights reel” performance. The work they do with their images then is not to gain status, but rather to create a visual representation of their social worth.

Impression Management, Photo Shoots, and the Personal Fable

The first impression management work teens have to do on Facebook is to decide what to post (Kramer and Winter 2008). To manage the Facebook fable involves a great deal of strategy. I asked participants in the interviews about the impression they are trying to create with their images on Facebook, they all had a clear answer and rationale for their selection. In other words, the choices are rarely arbitrary and unimportant, and they are highly aware of the impression management work they are doing. When Tom, an articulate 12th grade boy with an interest in politics was asked if he ever thinks about the image he presents on Facebook, he said:

Tom: I do. Um, ‘cause I’m always worried like, I’ve always liked politics. And I’ve always been worried about what they’re gonna say about our Facebooks and Twitters later,

Interviewer: Yeah [laughs] where this stuff is gonna sit,
**Tom:** Yeah so I guess I’m always kind of worried about like the image I give off. That’s why I tend not to use Facebook liberally; um I usually interact with other people’s things instead of posting my own.”

The fear about how his image may be interpreted in the future led Tom to play a more passive role on Facebook, responding to others’ pictures and comments, rather than posting his own original content.

Others manage the Facebook impression management work through other means; however these are equally strategic and thoughtful. One of the most important components of the Facebook image is appearance, which can be managed, within reason, through image selection. Appearance is a critical component of the surface self presentation. What constitutes flattering imagery on Facebook is gendered; girls make sure that they look good by heavily managing content. They do this through organizing photo shoots, which are designed to ensure that clothing, hair, makeup, and pose are as flattering as possible. Girls talked about setting up photo shoots where they coordinate with their friends to take pictures with the express purpose of putting them on Facebook. They take many pictures and then go through them together to decide which one should be posted usually or a profile picture. Amala, the chatty 9th grade girl who does not have Facebooks herself, but participates in many photo shoots for her friends’ Facebook, described the process for me:

**Amala:** No like um, my friends and I, well one of my friends has, her backyard has like really nice lighting… And so when one of them needs like a new pro pic, we’ll, we’ll actually like go in there and,

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Amala:** And look nice and we’ll take pictures.
Interviewer: Okay so you’re kind of helping each other out?

Amala: Yeah.

Interviewer: Picking out like,

Amala: What you’re,

Interviewer: How to pose,

Amala: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then taking the pictures and then looking at them together.

Amala: Mmhm

According to Amala when someone needs a picture, they will get together, ensure that they “look nice,” and then create a picture. From Amala’s comments, it is clear that creating the picture involves deciding how to pose, taking the pictures for friends, and then evaluating them. They can also manage this by editing photos for flattering lighting in Instagram (a company recently acquired by Facebook). For the girls, the photo shoot offers the chance to show how pretty you are, but also just having the photo shoot picture, with its “photo creds” (photographer credits) to the friends who were there, may also indicate something about your social capital via friendships and social connectedness. It is a collaborative process which marks their group membership.

Below is a picture from 9th grader Izzy’s photo shoot with friends (Figure 13). It was taken in a context similar to the one described by Amala. Her image is obviously highly stylized and is markedly different from her other Facebook pictures in terms of pose and her use of Instagram editing. When asked in the interview to describe this image, Izzy said that her good friend took the picture while they were “goofing around”
in the yard being “arty.” This term arty, came up often with the girls as a way to describe images influenced by stylized fashion magazine editorial spreads (Mears 2011). In these images, more care is given to the background, lighting, clothing, and pose than in a standard photograph. They also use this term “arty” because it gives them an out; if the image is described as arty, it implies that they were doing it to be artistic, not trying too hard to look good.

Amala and Izzy suggest that pictures are often created with the sole purpose of presenting a flattering Facebook image. Amala describes the impression management work that goes into the photo shoot as a group effort; the friends work together to coordinate the picture (examples include deciding where/when to pose to maximize flattering lighting, getting everyone together for the photo shoot, determining what to wear, and deciding who will be the photographer), how to pose (arty, natural, doing what
they call “model posing, etc”), and then evaluate them together to determine which picture should end up on Facebook. Because it is socially acceptable for girls to care about appearance, they can be a bit more direct in this quest for flattering pictures. Every participant in the study including the boys, could articulate the point of the photo shoot, and while some of the girls were a bit embarrassed to talk about their own photo shoot images, they did feel that it was normal for girls to have a photo shoot image as a profile picture.

Below are two of 9th grader Cassie’s images (Figures 14 and 15). Figure 14 is from a photo shoot while Figure 15 is not. Her model pose in Figure 14 indicates that the image was clearly staged.

![Figure 14](image)

In contrast Figure 15, while still posed and edited through Instagram, is what they would describe as a typical (and here I think they mean natural and not obviously staged)
teen selfie; it was taken by the girl on the left and although flattering in its way, is not overly “done” or staged.

Figure 15

In the following interchange Cassie both gently mocks those who spend hours doing photo shoots while also acknowledging the value of the end product of the photo shoots:

**Cassie:** Um, but if you, I mean people go out and they’re like, “Alright today I’m gonna make a new profile picture,”

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** And spend like 3 hours like going around like taking artsy pictures.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.
Cassie: Then obviously when you’re posting it, you don’t just want to be like, “Okay I want like my three best friends to see this.” You want to be like, “I want a good, I’m proud of this picture and I want like a good portion of people, I mean guys, too to see this.”

Interviewer: Okay, alright so you just brought up two things; one is the photo, what I’m calling the photo shoot right which is like the full getup like going into the backyard, posing for a while,

Cassie: Yeah.

Interviewer: To get the perfect shot, okay is that pretty common?

Cassie: Yeah [laughs].

Interviewer: Okay, um and it’s pretty obvious.

Cassie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like when you look at it, okay so what is, the point of that is just to get this like perfect, great shot?

Cassie: Yeah well I mean sometimes it’s fun to like,

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cassie: I mean it’s fun, it’s nice to get a really good picture of yourself.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cassie: If you find one that’s really good, you’ll be like, “Oh wow I’m pretty.”

Interviewer: Right.

Cassie: And like,

Interviewer: Right.

Cassie: Um, feel good about yourself. Um, but yeah people do go out and they like, and my friends sometimes come over and they’re like, “Hey photo shoot?” [Laughs] and then they like, then you go do it but,

Interviewer: Okay so but the whole point of that is to get a Facebook profile picture pretty much or is that not?
Cassie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cassie: I mean the, the original point is to get a Facebook profile picture but for mine, for me it’s like, “Okay I’m gonna get a profile picture,” I mean I never end up actually getting one.

Cassie notes some ambivalence about the photo shoots; she subtly mocks the girls who spend three hours taking “artsy” pictures and also is certain to note that it is her friends, not her, who will initiate the photo shoot; however, at the same time she also says that it is “nice to get a really good picture of yourself.” She saw that once she gets this great picture it is important to her that boys see it. Perhaps more interesting is her next comment, “if you find one that’s really good, you’ll be like, “Oh wow I’m pretty.” Cassie’s comment speaks to the ways in which these Facebook experiences become internalized. While the girls all acknowledge that friends will say they look pretty and tell them to “pro pic” the best ones, Cassie suggests that seeing the image for yourself and believing it is beautiful, is what really affects you. While we can lament the fact that girls worry about appearance to the extent that they do, I argue that this is no different from what happens offline with one key exception. The photo shoots give the girls such control that almost everyone finds a good picture. Even Cassie, who says that she often does not end up with a profile picture, still has that feeling of “Oh wow, I’m pretty” after viewing her photo shoot images. Although my data cannot prove a correlation, there is reason to question whether this experience of seeing yourself in what you deem to be a flattering image on Facebook can positively affect self-esteem.
One of the most striking findings from my research is that none of the girls spoke about trying to reach some unattainable popular culture version of beautiful. Because of the value placed on authenticity that all adolescents share on Facebook, the goal is not to look like a model, but rather to present, as Amala said, “your best self.” In the following interview excerpt Amala explains that while appearance is important, the goal is not to look like a supermodel.

**Interviewer:** Do you hear people talk about the stress of looking good enough or is it more just like generally just like your best self?

**Amala:** I think it’s your best self.

**Interviewer:** Okay, alright.

**Amala:** Like you look good,

**Interviewer:** I know, I know you don’t mean to sound,

**Amala:** Yeah I don’t want to,

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**Interviewer:** Yeah for you, you look good.

**Amala:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** I know what you mean; it’s not like a comparison to like Giselle.

**Amala:** Yeah exactly,

**Interviewer:** It’s like a, this is my best,

**Amala:** Best.

**Interviewer:** Picture that I have and that’s what I’m gonna show.

**Amala:** Yeah.
Many girls articulated similar comments about showcasing your “best self.” Everyone knows that your profile picture will present your most flattering image, but again, it still has to look like you. While almost every girl had some sort of bathing suit or bikini shot, a variety of body types were presented. None of the girls in my study were significantly overweight, and as such, my results may be skewed, but still it is important to note that the stress was not about looking super thin or model beautiful, but about appearing as your best self. They all said the stress was not about looking perfect, but about ensuring you have a really great image when you need to change your profile picture, which they do about every couple of weeks.

While the photo shoot pictures are fairly obvious examples of strategic impression management, even the more subtle pictures are highly planned and executed. Boys, who uniformly reported that it is not masculine behavior to take or pose for pictures still want to look like their best selves in their images. With the exception of two boys, Matt and Noah, all of the other boys indicated that it is important to them to look good in their profile pictures. Matt, whose image with his girlfriend is below (Figure 16), said that he does not care about looking good because he has a long term girlfriend.
Noah, a 12th grade boy who talked about being “antisocial on Facebook,” seems to derive great pleasure in having authentic images, regardless of how flattering they are. For the rest of the boys, appearance is important, but the challenge for them in this realm is that it is deemed feminine to take pictures and to appear to care a lot about your appearance. As such, many said that they rely on others to take pictures. While this may explain why boys have fewer images, it is clear in talking to them that despite fewer images, they are no less strategic in finding a flattering profile picture. When I asked Jake how the boys negotiate this balance, he said “poorly, we do it poorly,” which was his rational for why boys have fewer images. Some were more open and spoke about relying on their parents to take a great athletic shot, which gets around having to take the picture as well as ensuring you appear manly and athletic in your image. Others talked about cropping themselves out of a group picture if they look good in it. Peter and Beruk
talked about how to subtly set up a male version of a photo shoot in a group setting. For Beruk, getting a flattering profile picture clearly requires a great deal of strategizing and effort. What is important for him is that you appear to have put in very little effort. As he says in the interview “You can’t do that, you have to be like, “I look good without even trying to look good. Like, “I’m just going on with my business but I’m looking good.” While the girls’ photo shoots send clear signals of “this is a flattering picture of me” the boys have to appear more circumspect at least in the offline creation of the image. However, the casualness of their images belies their true efforts to create equally flattering images.

There is also a need to get into pictures in order to document friendships or cool events on Facebook. Beruk described the strategies he sees boys employ, which although they do not contain the peer support component embedded in Amala’s experience, virtually mimics what she described the girls are doing in photo shoots:

**Interviewer:** So do you think people like are consciously like trying to get pictures?

**Beruk:** Yes. One hundred percent yeah I think people are always um, aware of them and always looking for like they’re always like, they’re always um, constantly like thinking about like, I think probably when like if they see an opportunity to like get a picture without having to ask for a picture or something like that they’ll try,

**Interviewer:** They’re gonna go for it.

**Beruk:** And get it, yeah you see it, it’s kind of like animals like you go to a party.

**Interviewer:** That’s what I’m wondering.

**Beruk:** You see one person like taking pictures people always like, guys especially you like are always like running into like the picture like photo bombing.

**Interviewer:** Photo bombing okay.
Beruk: Just to get into it. And like, ‘cause they want, you know they want that photo to be able to post it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Beruk: Without having to ask for the picture or take a picture themselves.

Interviewer: Okay it’s like, it’s fairly obvious when it’s happening.

Beruk: Yeah it’s pretty obvious but people try to like be discreet about it.

Interviewer: Right.

Beruk: Or people try to act like they don’t, they don’t care.

Getting the picture for Facebook can lead boys to this fairly obvious act of photo bombing Beruk describes, in which boys literally jump into pictures right before they are taken without being invited, which is accomplished with varying degrees of finesse. Beruk says that boys will photo bomb to get an image, in this case a party picture, because “they want that photo to be able to post it,” which creates an interesting point of connection between the online and offline worlds. This implies two important things: first, the boys Beruk is referring to clearly think about their Facebook when they are engaged in their offline lives. They are not photo bombing at the party just to be in the picture; they are photo bombing because they want to have a picture to post on Facebook. Secondly, although their images do not appear as stylized as the girls, boys are investing a significant amount of effort into social media. To be thinking about Facebook and the images you want while also managing your face to face interactions at a party, is a lot for teens to negotiate. That they bother at all suggests that the images hold a great deal of meaning for them.
In addition to working hard to get certain pictures, some participants reported that they are actually just as strategic in what they choose to leave off Facebook as they are about what to post. Just as in face to face interactions, adolescents do not present every photo they take or even every facet of their personal fable on Facebook. Cassie, an energetic and athletic 9th grade girl said

**Cassie:** ‘Cause I’m, I’m kind of a nerd, um I, I try to post like achievements.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Um, but, I mean there’s also like, oh I want to post this but I don’t want to be like, “Look at me. I got like this.”

**Interviewer:** An award or something.

**Cassie:** Like I got an award in Spanish but I didn’t post it because I didn’t, I didn’t want people to be,

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** Like, “Oh god it’s her again.”

Although she acknowledges that her story is that she is “kind of a nerd,” she still does not want this part of her personal fable to dominate her presentation of the self on Facebook, or at least not too often. What is interesting here is that she talks about it as an initial desire to post the image, but then her ultimate decision to hold back, suggesting a controlled and well thought out impression management.

**The Balance between Authenticity and the Highlights Reel**

The notion of the “highlights reel” is not to suggest an inauthentic presentation of the fable. It is an accurate, if perhaps incomplete, presentation of the self, just as a photo album one keeps at home contains only the best pictures (in terms of appearance and
experience), so too Facebook collects the images that, as another 12th grade boy said, “document us being awesome.” One 12th grade girl referred to it as an accurate portrayal with just “maybe more flattering pictures.” While their personal fables may lead them to different definitions of what makes them awesome, such as partying or not, overtly showcasing their body or doing so more subtly, all the images that get posted are selected with the goal of presenting the best versions of themselves. The interesting thing about this reel self is that the adolescents I interviewed all spent a great deal of time explaining how their Facebook front stage performance represented their true selves, or the “real me.” In his interview Chris, a popular sports obsessed 12th grade boy, described his Facebook as “pretty realistic” and felt that they guy that they meet in person would match the “guy on Facebook.”

Below is one of Chris’ pictures. The caption he gave this picture is “2 sports in the spring?” While Chris’ picture may be realistic in that he actually does play two high status sports in the spring, it is clearly designed to send some important signals about his athleticism, a trait coveted by the teenage boys in my study. The image obviously shows him in full lacrosse gear, and the caption, “2 sports in the spring?” also lets the reader know that he plays another sport as well. While Chris does not do these things for Facebook, his choice to post here in this way shows clear impression management work. He chooses this, the highlights reel, over other equally accurate images that perhaps do not document the awesome in the same direct way.
Similarly, Izzy, a smiley earnest 9th grade girl, who spoke at length about the strategy and work involved in coordinating her profile picture photo shoots with friends simultaneously described her pictures as effortless.

**Izzy:** But I take [pictures] of my friends all the time.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so if you guys were hanging out and you do something goofy and,

**Izzy:** Like I’m not trying to make it look cool or anything, I’m just taking a picture.

Izzy tries to downplay her strategies and effort to create her Facebook presence in the interview by saying that she always takes pictures and is not trying to make them “look cool or anything.” Yet she had some of the most clearly posed and styled shots I observed. Below are some examples of images from one of Izzy’s photo shoots (Figures
18-20), which as documented earlier, require considerable effort and time; these photographs were taken in a friend’s yard over the course of an afternoon and then all uploaded at once to Facebook.

Figure 18

Figure 19
To some extent, this type of talk about the “real me” that downplays the effort involved, is a form of Goffman’s face saving (Goffman 1955); it is far less risky to say “this is just what I look like” or “I’m just taking pictures” than to admit that you really worked hard to craft something about the self. But I do think it is very important to all the teens interviewed that they are able to “back it up” offline, as one boy described, meaning that you cannot stray too far from your offline presentation. A flattering picture is acceptable; something that goes beyond that to the point where you no longer look like yourself is not. These findings offer a counterbalance to the research done by Turkle (2011), in which she argues that teens often present very different or altered versions of the self on social media. The boys in particular felt that it was very important to be authentic and spoke about the negative reactions that some boys experience when they cannot authenticate their Facebook image offline. As Myles put it, “the thing at [my school] is if you post like something you’re trying to like, like put yourself out like so like…People will call you out on it. They’ll be like …And if like, let’s say it’s like, disguising yourself…six guys will rip on you…for like a period.” Boys will call each
other on their inaccuracies and exaggerations, and while girls may not verbalize this, they reported that they judge those people as “trying too hard” and “fake” in similar circumstances. It is clear that there is a fine line between showing authentic highlights and overdoing the reel self on Facebook.

Thus far this chapter has served to highlight some of the general front stage findings. Appearance is important as is negotiating a balance between an authentic self and a highlights reel self. The remainder of the chapter will present the more specific themes that emerged in the image analysis. The profile pictures will be discussed first because participants described them as the most important images you upload to Facebook. The profile pictures overemphasize the surface self highlights reel because participants know that they will be used by others to form the first impression. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the other images posted, either to the wall, timeline, or as an album. Categories are presented for the most common image typologies.

**Setting the Stage: The All Important Profile Picture**

The profile picture coding revealed a front stage presentation that overemphasizes the surface self. This makes intuitive sense as every participant indicated that the profile pictures matter most, as these images present essentially, your Facebook first impression. Impression work is risky in general, but particularly so when that impression is made visually. To manage this the teens I interviewed generally selected very safe and flattering profile pictures that mirror friends’ images. This means then that while the profile picture is emphasized in the impression management work, it is probably the least
indicative of the presentation of the evolving self. As a result, almost all profile pictures fall into two categories of the surface self—those that emphasize appearance and those that showcase friendships and social groups. Family, extracurriculars, and anything with a serious tone (such as politics, academics, etc) are absent from the profile pictures. The reasons for this surface self presentation will be explored in the following chapter, but first it is important to examine the ways the surface self gets enacted on Facebook as it has important implications for the presentation of the Facebook fable.

The girls’ profile pictures are virtually identical; while none are overtly revealing, all highlight their physical appearance. Indeed many of the girls said that the whole point of the profile picture is to present a flattering image of the physical self. Cooley (1964) says that the body becomes important for the self when it holds a “social function or significance.” Facebook gives the body a significant social function as it is one of the things that allows teens to show the “awesome.” Below are three girls’ profile pictures from the study (Figures 21-23). These girls range in age from 16-18 and do not all attend the same school, yet they are remarkably similar. These images are posed and showcase the individuals in the most flattering light possible. Although one girl is posed with her date, the idea of the picture: dressed up and highly posed to emphasize appearance, is the same.
Figure 21

Figure 22
Marie, the 12th grade girl pictured in Figure 23 said that she wanted to change her picture to a prom picture because this type of image (important event, dressed up, etc) tends to “do well” on Facebook and therefore she had the chance to get a lot of likes on it. She describes her decision making process:

So then it’s like, “Oh all of these are horrible,” so I kind of just was looking through and then like um, [my sister] was, I was saying like, ‘cause I wanted to upload, I don’t really change my profile picture that often so I was kind of thinking I should just change it and so um, I was like, “Why don’t I just do it for prom because everyone else is...And like I’d get the opportunity for a lot of people to like it because a lot of people were like liking pictures so, and [my sister] said she liked that one so I just like decided to do that one and that’s, and I felt like that was like the best one.

For Marie, the chance to get a lot of likes, primarily by uploading a picture that is very similar to other girls, was the motivation to change her profile picture. It is also interesting to note her thought process; she says that she picked the prom picture “because everyone else is” posting one and getting a lot of likes. Thus, she picks a safe
image that mimics what many other girls show because she is guaranteed to get likes. The image and the likes she will receive lead Marie to deem this a solid first impression. Again, to Marie and the viewer this image tells us little about her beyond the fact that she went to prom and looks pretty in her dress.

While the boys’ profile pictures also share similarities, they appear to have more freedom in their images than girls, which will be discussed further in the gender discussion in chapter five. Like girls, boys do care about physical appearance, but they have more freedom in how it is displayed and also tend to highlight experiences more than girls do in profile pictures. They are far more likely to use a concert picture with friends or a sports picture as a profile picture than girls, who generally opt for individual appearance focused profile pictures.

Chris’ picture (Figure 24) is most similar to the girls’ picture in that it is a posed prom picture, however while he uses it as his profile picture, he did not post the original picture. The girl in the picture posted it and tagged him in it, at which point he chose to use it as his profile picture. Chris similarly noted that he picked it because he thought it was a good picture of him.
Tom’s profile picture below (Figure 25) seems to signal an important event. Although he does not title the image, his dress, the crowd, and the fact that he is in front, seemingly with an audience, suggests achievement or success of some kind.
When asked to explain his decision to use this as a profile picture he said,

**Tom:** That was at graduation and I don’t know I think it gave off the image I want to give off.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Tom:** Like because I know some colleges look at your stuff and my name is actually my name on Facebook.

**Interviewer:** [Laughs].

**Tom:** So, um, so I figured and you know, everyone likes a guy who’s well dressed.

**Interviewer:** Yup.

**Tom:** So I got that going for me.

While Tom makes it clear, in his nod to politics and college admissions, that these images might be with him forever, he also notes that it serves a more immediate impression purpose too. In a subtle way, Tom, like Chris and the girls presented earlier, notes that his choice was made at least in part because it is a flattering picture that he believes will be well received.

This desire for flattering pictures, particularly those that will appeal to the opposite sex, may even lead some like Beruk to break some of the gender norms on Facebook. In Beruk’s picture (Figure 26), in which others are clearly cropped out, it is hard to determine where he is or what he is doing. In the interview he said that the picture was taken on a school trip and he chose to cut the other people out so that he would be the focal point of his picture. When asked to evaluate it, he said that

**Beruk:** “I think girls would like that.

**Interviewer:** Okay.
Beruk: I think some guys would be like, “That’s a borderline selfie.”

Interviewer: [Laughs] okay.

Beruk: But it’s like, “I don’t care.”

For Beruk, he is willing to break some of the gendered rules about boys taking ‘selfies’ if it means that girls will like the image.

While the photos may not be as posed or in some cases as revealing of the physical body as the girls’ profile pictures, the emphasis on boys’ appearance is still there and clearly matters. Additionally, while these images highlight a variety of experiences and events, they still all focus on the “highlights reel” of appearance.

**Backing Up the First Impression: Images from their Timeline and Albums**

After teens create the initial highlights reel impression with their profile pictures, they need to back it up with their other images. It is very important to them that the non
profile pictures support the presentation of the profile picture. As a result, most supporting images fall into the same two categories as profile pictures: those that document the self and those that document friendship. Although these images do capture the “highlights reel” these images seem to be a bit less generic, and it is here that we begin to see the ways that teens use the technology to begin to show their “real me,” of course bounded within the constraints of what is acceptable to show on Facebook.

Documenting Friendship

About half of the images I collected are individual shots and half include peers. Every participant I interviewed mentioned the importance of showcasing friendships on Facebook. Clearly, Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin’s (2008) notion of “know me by my friends” is a critical component of Facebook for these adolescents. Irrespective of gender, when peers are visible, the majority are same sex peers.

The girls’ pictures with their friends tended to fall into two typical archetypes: 1) those like the profile pictures—extremely flattering, stylized shots that seem to communicate to the viewer, “look at us, we are so attractive” and 2) the goofy/silly shots that send the message “look at us, we are so hilarious.” Both types of images signal that the peer group is awesome and even silly shots are still flattering images to some degree. The three images below illustrate these two categories of peer photos (Figure 27-29). The first is from Sara, who posted this photograph of her and a “close friend” after graduation (Figure 27). Sara’s picture is a fairly typically posed, flattering peer image; both girls are looking at the camera, smiling and are physically touching. It could easily be used as a
profile picture if or when she chooses.

Figure 27

This picture documents several things; first the pose indicates that these girls are good friends and second, the image is flattering and suggestive of a happy moment.

The next two photographs represent images of goofy friendship. The first picture was posted by a 12th grade girl, and captures a silly moment with a friend before class (Figure 28). Although this picture is not flattering in the traditional way that Sara’s image is, it still is a bit evocative of the presentation of the body, particularly in the stance and expression of the girl on the left. Lucy, the girl on the right, was tagged in the picture and it received 4 likes. Like Sara’s (Figure 27), the tone is fun and they are posed close together indicating a fun close friendship and perhaps that they themselves are fun/ funny.
Cassie’s image below is a picture taken with a friend shot that in the interview she laughingly, either with affection or embarrassment referred to as a “bathroom mirror selfie” (Figure 29). This picture was taken in the school bathroom on Valentine’s Day. It received no likes, which may be the result of the debate amongst the girls about how socially acceptable it is to take bathroom selfies.
Cassie had several “bathroom selfies” posted in an album, both alone and with friends and none received a significant number of likes. Like Lucy’s image, it is simultaneously silly and sexually posed. Indeed frequently the girls’ images were double coded as playful and sexy/flirtatious, which will be explored more in the gender chapter. Although these two images are very different from Sara’s on the surface, in reality I argue that all of them are highly stylized images of friendship that signal both who your friends are and how beautiful and fun you are.

The younger girls, like Cassie, have far more pictures with friends taken in domestic settings than they do of peer group events. This may be because of their limited access to resources (i.e. they cannot drive and have less access to “cool” events than older kids). As such, the majority of their pictures are taken at school or someone’s home.
Boys’ pictures with friends fall into three slightly different categories: 1) goofy pictures where everyone looks like they could care less about their appearance and 2) pictures with friends at cool events, such as sporting events, school trips, and parties, and 3) pictures with girls. Noah, a 12th grade boy, posted the image below (Figure 30), and like Lucy’s, its tone is silly and playful, however, unlike Lucy’s, there is no emphasis on the physical appearance. Indeed none of them look especially good and beyond knowing that they were together having fun, the picture does not tell the viewer much about the boys. All the boys are tagged in this picture and it received no likes.

![Figure 30](image)

Graham’s picture below documents a cool event (Figure 31). This image clearly highlights friendships and it is interesting to see the boys touching, as this was rare amongst male participants. But, the image also signals that he and his friends were able to go on to the field at a Patriots game. It received 8 likes and many more comments, all from boys. Some comments focused on the Patriots while some interestingly enough
were focused on the boys’ appearances.

**Figure 31**

In the focus groups and interviews the boys placed a lot of emphasis on the idea of having pictures with the opposite sex. I was told by virtually every boy that it is important to show pictures with girls, preferably good looking girls, on your Facebook as a way to signal their social worth to both boys and girls. Kenny, a 12th grade boy said that when selecting an image to post on Facebook, “like guys you’ll …pick those pictures of you with attractive girls.” Below is Matt’s version of his picture with a “hot girl,” who fortunately for him, happens to be his girlfriend (Figure 32). This picture was originally posted by his girlfriend, who tagged him in it. Again, due to the gendered norms around taking and posing for pictures, it was fairly common practice for the boys to utilize what girls post for their Facebook. Matt’s picture received 4 likes, 3 from girls.
It is an interesting image as Matt’s face is largely obscured by hers, and with the way the lighting comes through the window it is hard to see their faces at all. The point of this picture then is not to see Matt’s face, but rather to show the girl’s appearance and signal an intimacy between them through their body language and kiss. With this image he is signaling that he has a girlfriend. When I spoke with Matt about this picture he said that

Matt: …a big part of Facebook depends if you’re in a relationship or not.

Interviewer: Okay why?

Matt: If you’re not in a relationship you’re probably gonna try to look good in your photos and all that stuff but if you are in a relationship you might not care as much about that. I think it’s kind of interesting.

Interviewer: Okay so you feel like presentation to the girls, like girls,

Matt: Yeah that’s actually.

Interviewer: If you’re not with somebody,
Matt: Yeah I think that’s a big part of just like social, social media in general.

Interviewer: Versus if you don’t care as much if you’re not looking for somebody then you’re just gonna put out whatever’s there.

Matt: Yeah.

Matt feels that he does not have to look great in pictures because he is in a relationship and therefore does not feel any need to impress girls, unlike many of his unattached friends. Thus for him, showing his appearance is not important, but it is important for him that it is a “hot girl” as that has implications for him.

Max, another 12th grade boy who does not have a girlfriend, shows another example of the picture with girls (Figure 33). This picture, which he is tagged in, was captioned “PIMP” and received five likes, four from boys. When I asked Max about this picture he said that it was taken on a spring sports training trip with his team. He said he was humoring older boys on his team by taking a picture with these girls who were “completely plastered.” He said that he knew that the image was going to end up on Facebook when it was taken and was fine with it because he felt that it sent the message that he was a “flaming success” with the ladies. He said this with humor, mocking himself and the image, but again, had no intentions of taking down the picture on Facebook. Perhaps this is Max’s hoped for reality.
While the boys certainly had more pictures with the opposite sex than the girls did, given the importance they placed on this in the focus groups and interviews as an image type they need to show, I was surprised that they did not have more pictures with girls.

*Documenting the Self*

While documenting friendship is important, particularly for younger teens, there is also a strong desire to document the self. Like the profile pictures, these album images continue to overemphasize the physical self; however the presentation does differ by gender. Below are examples of the ways in which boys and girls present the physical self in their Facebook photo albums. The first image is of Kate, a 12th grade girl (Figure 34).
She posted this photograph herself after editing it on Instagram. She received 39 likes and the majority of the comments she received were in focused on her appearance, including one from a girl that just said “sex.” The image is very provocative and flirty, with her hand running through her hairs, her lips parted, and the way that she has played with the lighting on Instagram.

Figure 34

The next two images are from Carly’s photo album that she posted herself. The first picture, which clearly crops out the other girl in the picture, received 16 likes and 2 comments about how “sexy” and “pretty” she looks (Figure 35). Participants explained to me that this cropping is done so that the person in the image is the focus of the picture. Like Kate’s Instagrammed image above, this editing ensures that everyone sees Carly at her best.
Her second image is also focused on the body, but the tone of this picture feels different; while the first picture fits into the context of a flattering beach picture, the second pose is more suggestive and provocative (Figure 36).
Like Matt’s image with his girlfriend, the shadows make it so that you can hardly see her face, thus even further highlighting the body. These shadowed images are interesting to me because they are not “good” photographs in a traditional sense. Yet, these images remain because they serve a purpose—for Matt the shadows keep the emphasis on his
girlfriend while for Carly the emphasis remains on her body. While both of Carly’s images were coded as body pictures, the tone of the second one feels more provocative to the viewer than the first.

In contrast, Peter, a 12th grade boy’s depiction of the self sends a very different message (Figure 37). While not focused on the body, this image clearly signals several important things about Peter; first, his socioeconomic status is signaled through the car and his clothing—it is Peter in the context of consumerism. Peter also mentioned in the interview that he saw this as a flattering image of him. The picture was posted by a girl and received six likes.
There were a few boys who clearly eschewed this model, opting to post pictures that seemed intentionally unflattering. Noah hardly ever posts his own pictures to his Facebook and began our interview saying “Yeah typically. I don’t, I don’t post very much on Facebook; you might have noticed.” After we discussed the fact that some people post everything about their day, including the breakfast cereal they eat, he said

**Noah:** You’re probably thinking I’m kind of antisocial because I don’t post that many things.

**Interviewer:** So do you think that’s true? Like do people think that? Because I don’t post anything online [laughs] so do people think that you’re antisocial if you don’t?

**Noah:** Yeah that could be true.”

Here is where we start to see some of the self narrative work that is often masked by these surface presentations. Noah assumes that his lack of Facebook work means that others see him as anti-social and he tests this theory out on me early in our interview. His comment that this “could be true” indicates that he is working through this self conception on two levels—first, do others equate limited Facebook use with antisocial tendencies as he thinks and secondly, does he fit this antisocial label. Later we discussed the fact that while others may care about how they look on Facebook, Noah does not spend much time focused on it. He says

**Noah:** I don’t really screen images to see if I look good.

**Interviewer:** So you’re not thinking of is this as like, “I look good in this picture”?

**Noah:** No.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Noah:** I figure the way I look in the picture is probably how I look in real life.
This is Noah’s fable; over the course of the interview it became clear that his personal fable is all about being real and taking pride in his more antisocial tendencies. In fact, he ridicules those who he perceives as caring too much. His pictures in general have a very different feel to them as compared to his peers, and very few of his pictures had likes (Figure 38).

The pictures he does have were mostly posted by others. For him, the impression he is developing on Facebook highlights his authenticity and a lack of concern about his image. Yet, at the same time, he is still crafting an image; he makes the goofy or weird faces in pictures on purpose, and acknowledges that he knows when the pictures get taken that they will end up on Facebook, saying “Like whenever someone takes a
pictures, it’s probably gonna end up on Facebook.” Additionally, he brings up the notion that his performance may come across as antisocial, which again suggests self reflection of this impression. Thus, Noah’s presentation of the self, while different from many of the boys, fits with his personal fable and his own version of what it means to be awesome, which for him means not getting caught up in “branding yourself” and just being real.

Another interesting facet of the presentation of the self and body can be seen in athletic pictures. I observed a few pictures, such as Chris’ hockey picture below, which showcase his entire team celebrating on the ice after a big win (Figure 39). We can infer this because they are all doing a pose the boys in the focus group described as to “throw up the one,” which indicates athletic success. This picture received 16 likes and Chris’ comment on this picture “fucking right boys,” is directed to his fellow teammates. This is the highlights reel in all its masculine glory.
However, beyond these few celebratory images of big tournament wins, for the most part the team is noticeably absent in the athletic pictures that participants posted. Figures 40-42 are three athletic images from Michelle, Max, and Beruk. They are engaged in team sports, but have chosen either to select images that do not highlight the team, or in the case of Max, to crop the teammates out altogether.
Figure 40

Figure 41
This focus on the individual in athletic shots surprised me as I had initially thought there would be more status inferred from pictures like Chris’ team picture (Figure 39); to be seen in the context of other equally athletic peers would seem to give you both athletic and social cache. Yet this hypothesis did not hold for my participants. After examining many of these individual images and talking to participants about them, I now believe that these pictures dominate because they allow the teen signal, and in a way perhaps overemphasize, his or her athletic contributions. In the images above, all three teens appear to be in control and dominating athletically, yet we honestly have no idea if this is the truth. In Michelle’s picture we do not see her competitors or her results (Figure 40), in Max’s picture we have no idea how he compares physically and technically with the other rowers in his boat (Figure 41), and in Beruk’s picture we have no sense of whether this is a warm up or a midgame play and whether his play was successful (Figure 42). In the individual shot, which removes the larger context, they can signal their awesomeness on the field without running the risk of being compared to
others who may be fitter or better. This provides an important safety net.

**Conclusion**

Adolescents engage in creating a public personal fable on Facebook. It is rooted in one’s offline social status and notions of the self, but it can be seen publically and visually on Facebook. The front stage presentation of the self now happens for teens in two media. First, in the face to face offline interactions that Goffman (1959) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) describe. The second takes place on social media. The Facebook front stage, while rooted in the offline front stage, feels different for teens because of its emphasis on presenting a visual image of the self.

The adolescents I interviewed negotiated this by engaging in highly strategic impression management work. While there are some momentary lapses in judgment evident in the images I observed, for the most part the adolescents’ reported very thoughtful and rational reasons for selecting certain images. This level of strategy, coupled with the time and emotional investment they make on Facebook, means that the online impression management is very controlled. While it can be hard to manage each face to face interaction with peers, it is in some ways easier for them to manage the presentation work they do on Facebook. They have time to think it through, select an image, consult with friends if they choose, and ultimately have the power to delete the whole thing if it all goes horribly wrong, though few of them do. The fact that they do not delete indicates that Facebook rules conform to ideas of the authentic self.

They simultaneously refer to the external presentation as the “real me” but also acknowledge that, like any photo album we keep, Facebook largely represents the
“highlights reel” of their experiences, relationships, and appearance. This discrepancy is not troubling to them, and indeed there is nothing about the highlights reel that is inauthentic. While it might not represent every facet of the individual, neither does our offline front stage performance.

Ultimately, what gets presented on the highlights reel, particularly in the all important profile pictures, is the surface self. This emphasis on the surface self in profile pictures becomes more substantive when looking at the timeline images and photo albums that make up the overall Facebook, but the first impression is largely an emphasis on appearance and experiences, and sometimes friends. This impression work is guided by a set of Facebook rules, many of which I have hinted at in this chapter, but will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. These rules are critical because they bound the presentation that adolescents give and also serve as a way to mark symbolic boundaries and categories of worth, the effects of which will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: FACEBOOK RULES AND BOUNDARY DEMARCATION

The externalization of the Facebook personal fable is guided by rules, which adolescents follow and monitor in their peers. These rules are important because they provide the framework for their impression management work. The emphasis placed on following the rules explains why so many of the teens in my study have such similar pictures. While individual authenticity is important, it really is better thought of as an authenticity constrained by the Facebook rules. Although I will use it somewhat differently than originally intended, I will employ Bernstein’s term bounded authenticity (2007) to describe this rule bound expression of the authentic self; you cannot truly be yourself if that would involve violating the rules of Facebook. While this may reduce individuality somewhat it also affirms social group membership, an equally important component of adolescent development. The teens I spoke with rely on these rules because they reduce the unknown; without these guidelines, the impression management work on Facebook would be far more risky, as it would be hard to know how images or comments would be interpreted. Knowing and following the rules enables teens to, for the most part, ensure that their presentation of self is received in the way that it is intended. If teens violate the rules they are policed by peers and there appears to be social consequences for them. And these consequences have significant impacts; all of my participants indicated that while Facebook could not improve your offline social standing, violating the Facebook rules could hurt you socially both on and offline. One of my participants experienced this four years prior to the interview and he felt that he was still suffering the consequences socially. As a result, in addition to fostering impression
management, the rules also create social categories of worth between those who are able to follow the rules and those who are not.

**The Rules of Facebook**

Some of the Facebook rules are very direct and some are very subtle. There are some general rules that all adolescents have to follow and some that are enacted differently by males and females. While teens work hard to follow these rules, it was clear from the focus groups and interviews that they do not always understand or agree upon their meaning. While all of the girls I interviewed could demonstrate the “duck face” pose that almost all the girls have, very few could explain to me what the duck face means or why they do it. In the picture below both of the girls are doing versions of the “duck face,” a term all of the teens were familiar with and used to describe the pose, which involves pouty lips drawn forward like a kiss or duckbill (Figure 43).
None of the girls were sure of the origin of the “duck face” or its purpose. In fact, the only answer I received about the “duck face” came during my interview with Tom, an 18 year old boy who has a long term girlfriend. While he offers an explanation of the “duck face,” I am unsure of its accuracy.

**Interviewer:** That’s the thing I think of most, I don’t even really know what the duck face is but a lot of them do the duck face.

**Tom:** It’s because, it pulls your face, so if you have like a chin that you don’t like,

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Tom:** Or if you have like your cheeks are too big or something,

**Interviewer:** Oh I see.

**Tom:** It pulls your face forward.

**Interviewer:** I see, so it looks like you have sunken cheeks.

**Tom:** So it looks like you have sunken cheeks, it looks like your skin’s almost flawless.

**Interviewer:** Oh, you, you’re the first person who’s explained this to me, like really explained it to me because I, like I ask these girls and they’re like, “Oh no that’s what we do, ha ha ha.”

**Tom:** Yeah no it’s…yeah

Tom’s explanation is that the “duck face” is popular because it gives the illusion of a slimmer and more “flawless” face, which made sense to me in the moment given the intense focus on appearance amongst the girls. What was interesting is that after I heard this from Tom I asked several girls about this and their responses were “is that what it is?” or “really?” They did not necessarily agree or disagree with Tom; they really had no idea. Yet they all have a duck face picture, which speaks to the power of following these rules. While there is certainly not a “duck face” rule on Facebook, there is an
understanding that they learn. When girls look at other girls’ images and see that they all have a “duck face” image, it becomes something that they feel that they should have. This is not necessarily different from our offline lives, in which we conform to many norms without being conscious of the meaning embedded in them. While many of the rules that will be highlighted in this chapter exist offline as well, it is interesting to see how teens navigate these visually on Facebook. In this chapter I will present the Facebook rules I identified and will use data from the interviews and focus groups to show how the rules are enacted. The chapter will also include participants’ Facebook images as evidence of how individuals interpret these rules. Because, as it will become clear, while the rules are all followed fairly strictly, resulting in similar types of images, there is variability in the ways participants enact them that leaves room for the authentic self that is so important to the adolescent’s personal fable. The chapter will end with a discussion of how the rules help to formalize symbolic boundaries of social worth on Facebook.

**Authenticity Bounded by the Rules**

While I have mentioned the importance of authenticity in the previous chapter, it is important to note that it is really an authenticity bounded by the rules of Facebook. It is not acceptable to fabricate social situations or events to create a hoped for highlights reel. Thus, while the moments are all highlights, they all happened and do represent facets of the individual. Although participants spoke about showing their real selves, it was never truly the case that they revealed all. This is because the authenticity that gets
presented is bounded by the Facebook rules. In reality, they present what can be best described as a strategic and evolving authenticity.

Cassie, a 9th grade girl talked a lot about how her images are very real and mentioned repeatedly that she does not worry about likes, but then went on to explain exactly how her images serve specific purposes. When I asked her if there are certain types of images that girls should have she said that there were no expectations or rules:

**Cassie:** There’s not like a certain array,

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** That each person has to have, it’s not like, it’s not like there’s a sheet a paper.

**Interviewer:** Yeah checklist.

**Cassie:** Yeah checklist. But, I mean for me I definitely have to have pictures with my friends, I have to have a few artsy pictures.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Um, I don’t know it just shows like your feminine side.

**Interviewer:** [Laughing] yeah.

**Cassie:** Um, um,

**Interviewer:** So when you say artsy, you mean kind of like those ones where like, they’re kind of shadowed, the person might not be looking right at the camera but they look pretty good, hair’s looking, okay I just want to make sure I’m thinking of the same,

**Cassie:** Um, yup.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cassie:** And then, oh yeah I mean some girls, I mean the girls who are really like, really, really feminine, um don’t need this but I mean I, in particular, I’m like really, really centered around um sports, too.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.
Cassie: So I have sports pictures, I mean I don’t have like, like guys like a Boston Bruin’s logo but I have me and my team,

Interviewer: Right.

Cassie: And that’s kind of like a mixture between friends and um,

Interviewer: Right.

Cassie: Sports so it works out.

Cassie begins by saying that there is no “checklist” or rules about what pictures you need, however her language in the abovementioned section, “for me I definitely have to have,” indicates that she has created a set of rules that bounds her authentic presentation of the self. Most strikingly Cassie indicates that it is important for her to have “artsy” pictures, (i.e. photo shoot pictures) in order to show her “feminine side” because she is “really centered around, um, sports.” Clearly there are rules, at least as Cassie interprets them, about the balance between feminine and more masculine images. Cassie’s artsy pictures, like the one in Figure 44, can offset the more athletic image that she may project in school, or in the soccer pictures she is tagged in during the fall season (Figure 45).
What is clear is that even at 14, Cassie is clearly aware of how these images will be received and what they will signal to her Facebook friends. I would argue that these images represent the real Cassie—at least how she conceptualizes her fable in her mind—however, the images are also bounded by gender and social rules as exemplified on
Facebook. Cassie wants to present both of these sides of her and Facebook allows her to do so in a controlled way.

**Rule #1: Likes Mark your Social Status**

Likes are very important to all teens because they serve as important markers of status. First, the number of likes you receive matters; in a very surface way, the more likes you can accumulate the more social status you appear to possess and display. Again, it is not the case that the number of likes will determine your offline status, but rather that your offline social status becomes visible to people based on the number of likes you receive. What is also important to note is that the correlation they are making between likes and popularity is not necessarily accurate; all participants acknowledged that you can get likes for things other than being popular. As Lucy, a chatty 18 year old girl who spoke lightening fast and in full paragraphs commented,

> Well, like on Facebook, certain people who will get a lot of likes and stuff, which I think is the main thing, like that person’s popular, but it’s also like certain… people will get likes for different things, and from their group of friends, like for example someone might not be popular but they have a big group of friends who will like this picture they post, you know what I mean? So it will look like they’re really popular, but it’s could just be…I guess it depends on what you mean by popular, like some people might say popular is being really cool and stuff, but also it could be someone who has a lot of friends, so I mean…

When Lucy speaks it is clear that she is wrestling with definitions of popularity and what likes do or do not contribute to this, which indicates the challenge of the like; on the surface it has become a shorthand way to signal popularity, but it can mean other things. Thus, status by accumulation of likes is something of a misnomer. However, because of the importance of the surface impression management work, no one is willing to completely stop caring about likes.
While likes are important, boys’ and girls’ experiences with them differ. In the focus groups girls indicated that it is important to them to receive more than 20 likes on their profile picture. Between 10-20 likes was considered acceptable but not great, and less than four likes was considered a total disaster. In contrast boys do not get as many likes as girls, nor do they give as many likes. During the focus group the boys joked about the number of likes that girls get and acknowledged that they came nowhere close.

Participant: I think more girls look at likes.

Participant: You get more likes on the picture.

Participant: You see girls that have like 200 likes on their profile picture and it’s just like,

Participant: But you like, people like that, like she’s got something to say,

Interviewer: Yeah so that’s what,

Participant: But she’s got some, some sort of like reason why people like it,

Interviewer: Does it matter?

Participant: Sorry I just feel like the girls do it in a much more fake way I would say, like they like each other’s, even if, they’ll comment, “Oh you’re so pretty,” if guys did that, it would be really, really weird.

Participant: You look handsome man.

[Laughing].

Participant: It’s a nice photo of you, Tom.

[Laughing].

They are really split on girls’ likes; while one says that a lot of likes show that “she’s got something to say” another sees it as “fake.” But at the same time when they discuss their pictures they make it clear that the likes have an impact. When I asked Jake
to tell me the story of his profile picture below (Figure 46), he began by talking about likes:

![Figure 46](image)

**Jake**: Like I wasn’t posting it for likes, well I got, I was surprised actually with like how many people liked it.

**Interviewer**: Okay.

**Jake**: It was cool.

Jake’s comments are interesting because he chose to frame the discussion of his picture in terms of the number of likes he received. He first says that he did not post it for likes, but then goes on to say that he thinks the 27 likes he received were “cool.” This comment was completely unsolicited as I never asked him about likes. After we discussed this picture, taken during a graduation ceremony, I followed up and asked him more about the likes. He said “I don’t care, some people care.” In the unguarded moment of describing his image Jake reveals that it is “cool” to get so many likes, however when asked directly
about likes he sticks with gendered rules that say boys does not care about likes, although he is quick to point out that others do. These masculinity norms will be outlined in the next chapter.

In spite of the clear importance of likes and the frequency with which it came up in the interviews and focus groups, I was surprised by how few likes participants actually had on their pictures. Many participants did not receive the number of likes that they said they expected or hoped for, and there was a clear range within the data. The results were particularly striking for girls. The average girl’s picture posted during my two week observation periods received 1-10 likes. Some girls received 11-20 likes, but very few had more than that. And many pictures, particularly boys’ pictures, had no likes at all. This was unexpected and has several possible explanations. First, there is a distinct difference in the number of likes people receive for profile pictures vs. album or timeline pictures, and perhaps participants were thinking only of profile pictures in our discussions. Profile pictures receive far more likes, but over the two week period fewer profile pictures were posted than others, which would naturally lower the average.

However, even when you account for the limited number of profile pictures posted during the two week timeframe, there were still fewer likes than expected given what they described in the focus groups. This may result from girls inflating the number of likes they received when we talked about it in the focus groups. The girls talked about how bad it is to get less than 20 likes on profile pictures; however 3 out of the 12 girls with Facebook in the study did receive less than 20 likes on their profile pictures. Because I had no sense of what the range would be, I asked them and wonder if this had
the unintended effect of silencing some voices in the focus group. The answers given could have been inflated for the benefit of the others in the group or simply represent one end of the range. I did follow up in the interviews to see if these numbers were accurate, but participants may have been unwilling to challenge the numbers in an effort to save face. Whatever the reason, very few of my participants actually hit the likes targets mentioned in the focus groups.

In addition to status by likes accumulation, likes are important to adolescent participants because they really do mean something; even if they are not always clear about what the likes actually mean, it is clear that likes are a symbol of how you are received by your Facebook friends, and becomes essentially a form of Facebook friend feedback. In each interview I asked participants what likes generally mean to them. While it was clear that there could be many different meanings derived from the like, in general, participants interpreted likes to mean something positive about them—that they are pretty, popular, or funny. The meaning of likes was most straightforward for 9th grade girls, who saw likes as very clearly indicating attractiveness and/or popularity. Amala, the 9th grade girl who does not have Facebook, but observes vicariously through friends and her older sister, talked at length in the interview about how important it is to get likes. I then asked her what the like means:

**Interviewer:** So what does the like mean? Do you think?

**Amala:** I don’t know, I think it just makes you feel good about yourself I guess,

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Amala:** If you get more, then people, people like you, people think you’re pretty or whatever.
For her, likes mean you are pretty and people like you, this in turn “makes you feel good about yourself...” Thus the likes can be positive indicators of how well you perform the surface front stage impression management of signaling attractiveness and likability. Again, while Amala talks about looking pretty, it is also Amala who was very clear that it was not model pretty that girls are trying to achieve, rather the emphasis is on looking “pretty for you,” whatever that may be.

The meaning of likes for older participants is appropriately more nuanced. In addition to attractiveness and likability, likes can be used to give a thumbs-up to an image or event. Likes can also signal social connections; many reported that people give likes to show their ties to the picture, similar to commenting “I was here too.” Finally, there is something called the “sarcastic like,” which is really the opposite of a like. Sarcastic likes are used to mock the person posting the image or comment and send a signal to those who see it. As Jake notes, these “sarcastic likes” are common and can be perceived as funny:

**Interviewer:** And [the like] doesn’t have to be anything to do [with the image],

**Jake:** It could be a sarcastic like,

**Interviewer:** Right it could be like, “I really hate you and I’m liking this.”

**Jake:** I do that all the time [laughing].

Sarcastic likes can be as obvious as a “cool kid” liking a “loser’s” image, but Max was very honest in saying that he knows that he has received the sarcastic likes:

**Interviewer:** What are other things that likes can mean to you? Right ‘cause you could, you could get like a sarcastic like right?

**Max:** Oh all the time.
Interviewer: Okay so how do you, 

Max: Those are great. 

Interviewer: So how do you know it’s a sarcastic like? 

Max: Some of my quote unquote most popular posts were the ones where like, “Got hit by a car on a bike,” or, “Got two flats on a bike ride,” or like, “Ran into a tree,” or this one time I biked off a cliff and I, and it was like a 10 foot ledge but you know, “I’m gonna kill myself.” 

Interviewer: Right. 

Max spoke in jest and it was definitely not deeply troubling to him, but nonetheless it was clear that he knew that some of his pictures that do the best on Facebook are the result of getting sarcastic likes. Others just spoke about how hard it is in general to interpret likes and many of my participants, particularly boys, confessed that they sometimes have a hard time interpreting sarcastic likes correctly or knowing whether it is a real joke or subtle meanness. After Jake listed all the possible meanings for likes I asked him how he knows he interpreted them correctly:

Interviewer: So you’re constantly, 

Jake: It’s very confusing. 

Interviewer: Trying to figure out what’s going on, 

Jake: It’s very confusing. 

Interviewer: Okay, so how do you read it? Like how do you figure out? You just like guess, you’re guessing right? 

Jake: Yeah kind of, 

Interviewer: Okay. 

Jake: If it’s with a girl you know sometimes I’ll message her,
Interviewer: Yeah.

Jake: And just see how that goes, sometimes it goes well, sometimes it doesn’t.

Interviewer: Right.

Jake: I mean it’s just one of those things where you have to guess.

They all know that likes are important and that likes mean something, but they do not always know how to interpret the likes they receive and end up in a situation “where you have to guess.” This lack of clarity does nothing to diminish the power of the likes. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) meaning can be derived without true understanding of a phenomenon; what is important is not so much what the thing means, but rather the fact that one designates it as “expressing meaning” (129). To illustrate this, Berger and Luckmann (1966) give the example of someone laughing; we may not understand what the person is laughing at, but we know that his laughter is an expression of happiness, which makes it meaningful to us. I believe this same concept is at work with Facebook likes; while teens may not always be able to define their precise meaning, they know that likes are meaningful because they signal something positive about their impression work, and ultimately serve as feedback on the personal fable you are working to create. Thus, likes hold a persuasive power and teens work to cultivate a visual image that will receive a lot of likes. Or at the very least, maximize their potential for likes.

**Rule #2: Images not Words Signal your “Highlights Reel”**

As is true offline, it is challenging to boast about yourself on Facebook. Yet, if Facebook is to some degree at least, “a marketing campaign” as Max suggests, then it is important to find a way to boast discreetly. The teens in the study get around this
challenge by using images to signal things about themselves. While you cannot say that you are awesome, you can use images to “document” the awesome without violating social norms. This is not to say that all images are acceptable, and indeed an image alone is not risk free, but it seems safer to signal something with an image rather than to say it outright.

Sports, travel, attractiveness, or important experiences can all be shown through images in ways that are far more socially acceptable than writing status updates about your successes. Bikini pictures clearly show everyone that you have a great body without having to announce it. The image below, posted by Chris, a member of the hockey team, automatically signals status, at least in the traditional masculine sense (Figure 47). The team members, on the ice, all have one finger up to denote that they are number one.

Figure 47

This type of image was discussed in the boys’ focus group:

**Participant:** Well most guys do the one.
Participant: Yeah.

Participant: Look at Hayes, Look at every photo ever seen of Hayes,

Participant: It’s a running joke though.

Participant: Yeah all the,

Participant: Well that’s ‘cause they won.

Participant: That’s ‘cause they won the league.

Interviewer: That’s why, [laughs].

Participant: But I guess, I guess that’s where it came from because like you would originally throw up the one if you were, like if you were number one in something so if you were just like hanging out like, “I’m still number one.”

This image then works for Chris on many levels. First, it shows that he is a part of the hockey team, which automatically gives him status amongst peers. Additionally because the boys are “throwing up the one,” at the very least you can infer that they are “number one in something” as a focus group participant states. In this case they are league champions. But no one has to write this, least of all Chris. He can post this image and have it signal his team membership and athletic success to everyone.

Both boys and girls said that they have used likes to signal to someone that they are interested in them romantically. These likes are safer than interacting face to face because they can mean so many things that you are not putting yourself out there and risking rejection or ridicule. The challenge though is that they can be easily misinterpreted. In spite of this, they use the like to engage in subtle flirting and gauge the response before moving to more personal forms of communication. Several participants, both male and female, said that they could start with likes and/or Facebook comments,
and then if they received a positive response they would move to Facebook messaging, then texting, and then finally flirting in person. Thus Facebook likes can be the first step towards signaling potential romantic interest and establishing more contact.

The examples mentioned above are just a small subset of the signaling that goes on through Facebook interactions. The important thing is not the specifics that are being signaled but rather the fact that the images can be used to signal attributes of the personal fable that it would be socially unacceptable to boast about in words, and likes can be used to signal romantic interest that feels too risky to verbalize. In many ways all of the important information that you want send about your projected self is transmitted through visual signals on Facebook.

**Rule #3: Don’t Talk about Facebook**

In talking with participants in focus groups and interviews it was clear that they do not talk about what happens on Facebook offline with their friends. While a major violation of the rules or an amazing experience, such as a friend pictured with a celebrity, would be a topic of conversation, the day to day Facebook experiences are not discussed. This was one of the most surprising findings in the data as I assumed that given the time and energy they put into Facebook, it would be a part of their offline conversations as well. Virtually all participants, regardless of age and gender, disagreed with me. They said that they do not talk about their Facebook experiences with their friends or ask about theirs, opting instead to interpret and internalize their experiences privately.
There are some gender differences in the extent to which this is upheld. Boys do not talk about any part of the Facebook process with their peers; they select images, post comments or likes, and judge their responses without any consultation from peers. In contrast, girls will talk about all aspects of creating their Facebook with their friends until they actually post their pictures. Once the picture is posted, it becomes a private experience. Many girls said that while they have experienced slights on Facebook—everything from mean comments, being cropped out of pictures, and realizing your friends hung out without you—they never mention any of this to their friends. For both genders the process of making sense of what these experiences mean is largely individual. This may just be a part of the internal dialogue or dilemma of figuring out the emerging authentic self, or there may be something about Facebook which makes it difficult to translate to offline discussions. Either way, this creates an interesting scenario where teens are externalizing the personal fable to their hundreds of Facebook friends but then having this very private experience of reacting to the feedback and experience alone. While this could potentially have negative consequences if you are bullied, for day to day interactions it has the potential for a more positive aspect. Samantha, a 12th grade girl, spoke about how being alone when she processes Facebook feedback actually is freeing for her:

**Samantha:** I think it’s probably because like ….maybe it’s just cause they can’t see…their reaction. Like say they don’t respond, you don’t have to deal with them [to your face] yeah. It’s just like they don’t respond, but it’s not like you have to look and watch at them…I mean you do, but they don’t see your reaction to their reaction. It’s just sort of safer because you can do stuff, and people might still respond badly, but they don’t see you being offended by their bad response

**Interviewer:** so you’re in your room crying [laughs]
**Samantha:** And feeling like, oh that’s awkward. It’s less awkward.

Samantha feels that the fact that she does not have to look at the person or in her words, have them see “your reaction to their reaction,” makes her feel “safer” and “less awkward.” In this way, the processing of all this very loud externalization can remain quiet and safe. As a result, the Facebook process may just be part of the internal dialogue that we use to create our emerging, authentic self. This internalization will be discussed more in depth in the final chapter, but it is important to establish that they are all working from the rule that Facebook is not discussed offline.

**Rule Violation**

The notion that social hierarchies and popularity matter to teens is certainly not a new concept. Erikson (1959) argues that because adolescents do not have a clear sense of their occupational identity they “temporarily over-identify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds” (97). While this may be an overstatement of the ways symbolic boundaries create social hierarchies, his point is clear: adolescents are aware of where people fit into the groups they would like to join. More interestingly for this paper, Erikson (1959) goes on to say that adolescents become “…remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are ‘different,’ in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper” (97). Adolescents are overly intolerant of others as a way to confirm their status in the group and solidify social boundaries. Erikson (1959) argues that this behavior is
not arbitrary or mean, but rather simply a way to manage a lack of a coherent identity. Indeed, he argues that this behavior has positive consequences: “adolescents help one another temporarily through such discomfort by forming cliques and by stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies” (98). For adolescents this form of intolerance, and the subsequent strengthening of the symbolic boundaries that coincides with it, form very specific categories of worth (Steensland 2006) based on the social hierarchies. This can play out on Facebook via mean and bullying behavior. Thirty-eight percent of participants reported that someone had been mean to them on social media in the last 12 months, with males reporting higher rates of experiencing meanness (46 percent) than females (31 percent).

Those who violate the rules of Facebook are often the targets of mean comments or ridicule. Although the rules are not actually written anywhere or even discussed in any substantive way offline, participants are supposed to know and follow them. None of the girls, and only one of the boys in the study violated the social rules of Facebook during the observation period; however I was able to see others violate the rules occasionally as they came up in my participants’ news feeds. Participants spoke about rule violators at length during the focus groups, seeming to relish the chance to gossip about these people and their posts. It is evident that rule violation is considered to be a major social faux pas that can have consequences offline. The worst thing you can do, probably very similar to offline social values, is to make overtly cruel or offensive comments. The boys in particular spoke about the danger of sharing religion or political views. Racist comments
are absolutely taboo, although homophobic slurs, which will be explored in the next chapter, are acceptable and common for both genders.

After the cruel and offensive comments, the next worst rule violation is to come across as trying too hard. What they mean by this statement, which was used almost universally, is that you cannot present an inauthentic self on Facebook; either by trying to be something you really are not, or trying to fit in with a group that does not accept you offline. The images that most frequently received this type of judgment were girls’ overtly sexual posing (trying too hard to be sexy for boys), party pictures in which people look over the top intoxicated (trying too hard to seem like a cool kid), or overly flattering (“fake”) comments on people’s pictures such as “you look like a model” (trying too hard to be accepted by someone/some group through flattery).

These violations were retold, laughed about, and judged in all of the focus groups. It really did feel as though they relished the opportunity to talk about the rule violations and violators. Talking about rule violation is important to them because it allows them to set and maintain the social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries allow people to create and understand in-groups and out-groups and give people the language and rationale for categorizing the “other,” which serves to clarify and distinguish one’s own group memberships (Lamont 2000). Embedded in these symbolic boundaries are “cultural categories of worth (Steensland 2006),” which we use to judge those who are not part of our in-group. Gossiping about rule violators incorporates these “cultural categories of worth,” as it allows participants to assess whether or not they are part of the group and following the group’s rules. In the Facebook world where judgments are made mostly in
private, the focus groups may have provided participants with a chance to engage in this boundary maintenance work and reconfirm their own “categories of worth.” This then allows them to formalize their knowledge about what is appropriate on Facebook for their own impression management work.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this boundary work took place in one of the focus groups with the older girls. Towards the end of the focus group discussion Kate mentioned that her senior class has a Facebook page in which people can post or comment. The group then talked about how these class pages generally go; people can be hilarious, annoying, etc. The conversation, spearheaded by Kate, then turned to a boy who is known by several members of the group:

**Participant:** There are some people on there that do cyber bullying on there though.

**Participant:** Like Peter Antonelli?

**Participant:** No, the thing with Peter Antonelli is he like asks for it though

**Many:** He does

**Participant:** He goes to our school he’s a kid that goes to our school and he makes these statuses ….  

**Many:** Oh my God [laughs]

**Participant:** Like once or twice a week and there just like, I tried to screen shot them and send it to my friends [laughs] which is kind of mean, but like most of the time I can’t, like it won’t fit on one thing so I have to do two pictures of them [laughs] and they’re literally the most annoying things [laughs] And people are so mean to him on it.

**Participant:** No the thing is, he doesn’t realize that Facebook is like a joke like you post things that are funny, but he posts serious serious serious things. [laughs]

**Interviewer:** Like of current events?

**Participant:** No, like…
Kate then started to read an excerpt of one of his posts about an engineering program jointly offered by MIT and NASA. All the girls laughed throughout her readings.

**Interviewer:** So he thinks he’s a grown up

**Participant:** The thing about Peter is that he doesn’t understand.

**Participant:** No he kind of does, it’s not like he’s mentally unstable of something

**Participant:** No, but he’s a bit socially…

**Many:** awkward

**Participant:** but it’s more like he’s being serious…

**Participant:** He has a girlfriend

**Participant:** He does??

**Participant:** He does.

**Participant:** And I’m like listening to this like, he has a girlfriend, why does he have a girlfriend, and I don’t…

**Interviewer:** So do people follow relationship statuses?

**Participant:** It’s really awkward if no one likes your relationship change.

**Participant:** But some people like it as a joke, like I liked his relationship change because I thought it was kinda really ironic that he had a girlfriend. So I liked it [laughs]

This went on for a while with many more examples of his Facebook faux pas shared. To try to move the conversation forward I asked about bullying:

**Interviewer:** So he is the guy that grownups worry about being cyber bullied.

**Participant:** A little bit, but he’s so oblivious to it. He likes the attention.

**Participant:** Like he almost appreciates it. Like he doesn’t feel like a victim. He responds to it.
Participant: Wait, there was this one thing he posted on the group and people were pretty mean about it.

Participant: That we should wear togas [laughs]

Participant: Maybe yeah and then so later he was like ‘if anyone has shit to say to me they should say it to my face. I have no respect for people who hide behind their computer screen’...Someone says ‘wrestling match, 3rd lunch, the gym’ [all laugh] and Peter says ‘challenge accepted’

Participant: See how he says challenge accepted? He’s like…

Interviewer: So he’s engaging with them.

Participant: Right, but like,

Participant: It’s kind a sad though because he is, but like…

Participant: It is because he’s being serious, but he thinks people are like joking with him to be funny like, being nice to him in a funny way, but really they’re just being

Participant: Being mean to him in a funny way

Participant: And other people can see their comments and laugh

Participant: Exactly. They’re not trying to be funny with him, they’re trying to be funny, like about him.

Participant: This is a real life example. It’s not hypothetical [laughs]

This example illustrates several things about rule violation: first, the sheer enjoyment they took in outlining his consistent social missteps on Facebook. Even when the conversation began to veer into a discussion of relationship status or bullying, Kate immediately brought us back to Peter by reading another one of his posts. They all commented, and while those who did not know the boy were quieter, even they chimed in with judgments when the posts were read. Second, there is a clear feeling among these girls that this is not cyber buling and that this boy brings these problems on himself.
Whenever a comment was made that was more sympathetic to Peter and his situation, it was immediately negated. They deem that he “likes the attention” and “like he almost appreciates it. Like he doesn’t feel like a victim. He responds to it.” There is clearly very little sympathy for Peter and the group feels that he is entirely to blame for this ridicule. Even though they acknowledge that some of the comments directed at him are “mean,” they do not believe they are unjustified. It is clear that the punishment for rule violation can be severe.

Punishment is so socially ruthless because of the value adolescents place on authenticity and symbolic boundaries. The literature review outlines the ways that adolescents use symbolic boundaries to demarcate social groups, which are critical for one’s self worth and social connectedness. Social status is incredibly important for adolescents, as in large part, it is the mechanism through which they feel powerful (Milner 2004). Adolescent social status creates a form of symbolic power as those with high status within the social hierarchy are powerful because others in the group accept their authority (Bourdieu 1984). Adolescents focus on the social hierarchies in which they are embedded because they determine the peer group and romantic options available to them. Status is not unlimited within the social hierarchy, but rather a finite good that is won or lost; if my status improves, it comes at the expense of another’s status (Milner 2004). As a result, status must be guarded and maintained through status markers such as clothes and the “small cruelties” (Milner 2004) that adolescents inflict one another to ensure their elevated status position in the group. As such, in addition to creating these boundaries, they need to work hard to maintain them as your position in the social
hierarchy relies upon them. Violating the rules of the group has significant social consequences, according to my participants really the only consequence, on and off Facebook. To make sure that you both know the boundaries and that these boundaries stay in place, talking about Peter then serves a social purpose.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter describing Facebook rules as the tools teens use to negotiate the strategic impression management work they do on Facebook. They are keen observers of others’ pictures and actions as a result, they are highly aware of how their own images and comments will be received. This gives them a great deal of control over their posts. While many spoke of awkward or stressful face to face interactions, particularly with the opposite sex, all but Jake, the boy who was bullied on Facebook in 9th grade, talked about Facebook as a safer or less risky environment. They talked about the comfort of not having to see the person’s reaction, being able to know in advance how images would be received, and having the time and opportunity to choose what images to present for others’ judgments. While one could argue that they are hiding behind the screen to avoid messy and potential awkward face to face interactions, I think it is also fair to say that Facebook offers them a chance to assume control of their presentation of the self—to think about how the images connect to and tell, the story of their emerging self. While everything in our society, including the Facebook newsfeed, moves at a frenetic pace, their social media presentations of self happen at their own time and choosing. In talking to them, it sounded easier and less stressful than the offline impression management work. However, for Jake, the experience was the opposite. He
felt more comfortable face to face because he just could not get the Facebook rules; he made several statements in the focus group that were rejected by everyone else as being wrong and he had the least amount of interaction on his Facebook of any of my participants. He is stuck somewhere in this process and as a result does not feel that social media is safer or easier to manage.

The rules are also important because they allow adolescents to confirm their place in a social group. When the girls laughed at Peter Antonelli’s rule violations, they did so gleefully as it confirmed he was outside of the group and they were comfortably within the boundaries of the group. They do not make these mistakes because they know and follow the rules, and therefore he “brings it on himself.” Similarly Jake is more susceptible to rule violation, or at least being exposed on Facebook, because he is not a part of the group. He violates the rules of trying too hard and being inauthentic and as a result, he is not able to confirm his place within the boundaries of the social group. In his interviews Jake implied that girls had taken screen shots of his messages, the exact thing that Kate did to Peter Antonelli. This kind of thing does not happen to all kids equally. Thus, the rules, while comforting to the majority of teens who fit within a social group, can be a source of stress for teens like Jake because they are inextricably tied up with social status and the demarcation of group boundaries. While the majority of participants find that Facebook offers a chance to allow the authentic self to emerge, for Jake it can diminish this opportunity. In effect, the presentation of the Facebook fable for some is not a confirmation of the self or a process of moving forward, but a derailment of the developing self.
CHAPTER SIX: GENDERED RULES AND ENACTED ROLES

The rules outlined in the previous chapter are universal and in many cases directly mirror offline social norms. Other rules are differentially enacted by gender. Following gendered rules leads teens to enact gendered scripts and roles, particularly those that emphasize masculinity and femininity. This is consistent with the traditional theoretical constructs of gender role development, which point to adolescence as a time when gender identity is solidified (West and Zimmerman 1987; Gilligan 1982, 1987). Yet, gender is not just something that magically exists and to which we conform. Rather, it is work. Butler (1990) argues that gender is a “...kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing” (1). Calling upon Goffman’s notion of the performance, Butler (1990) writes that gender is not done alone, but rather always performed for others. People employ a variety of different gender strategies that are largely context dependent (Gilligan 1982, 1987; Thorne 1993). For the purposes of this research I consider Facebook to be a social context, and believe that while gender on Facebook is performed similarly to our offline presentations, the ways adolescents use the technology means that the gender performance becomes almost completely visual. This chapter will examine the gendered rules in detail and explain how they affect the presentation of the self, through the creation of gendered categories of worth.

Rules for Girls: Femininity in a Social Context

A cursory examination of any of the female participants’ images leads the viewer to one important conclusion: relationships matter to girls. Images with friends in close embrace, being silly, or even posing as models, are everywhere. The story of “these are
my friends” and “this is my group” is of vital importance to the girls’ personal fables. This is well documented in the literature and is supported by the “self in relation” theory first outlined by Surrey (1980). Surrey (1980) argues that women’s development of the self takes place within the important context of relationships, and thus “the primary experience of the self [for women] is relational (2).” This relational theory, supported by Gilligan (1982) and Miller (1976) among others, suggests that the traditional way that we think of the self, as a unique entity separate and distinct from others, does not apply as readily to women. For women, the self is always “in the context of important relationships (Surrey, 1980: 2).” Surrey’s (1980) analysis suggests that it is natural and appropriate for relationships to play an important role in girls’ Facebook fables, as it factors heavily into their narrative of self. Being a good friend and being seen as one who has many friends is very important to girls’ self conception. The following girls’ rules are all rooted in this relational perspective; I believe that everything that girls do on Facebook, even some of the overt bikini shots, is to cultivate and reconfirm relationships, or to at least give the appearance of this.

**Rule #1: Enlist your Friends to Create the Fable**

In the previous chapter I mentioned that girls do not talk about the feedback they receive on Facebook, however unlike boys, they do enlist their friends to help develop the front stage impression. They consult with their friends about what images to post and whether to use an image as a timeline or profile picture, relying on friends to suggest the most flattering or best picture possible. As discussed earlier, the younger girls even
coordinate photo shoots that involve friends in discussion about everything from
wardrobe choices, poses, and backgrounds. Marie, one of the senior girls, talked about
the role that her friend played in the posting of a prom picture I asked her about:

**Interviewer:** Okay, so this is a prom picture I would assume. Okay so just talk me
through the story of like this picture, why you posted it, you know like that kind of thing.

**Marie:** Okay well, it’s from like um, I didn’t really, I feel like I didn’t really like any of
my prom pictures.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Marie:** So then it’s like, “Oh all of these are horrible,” so I kind of just was looking
through and then like um, Lucy was, I was saying like, ‘cause I wanted to upload, I don’t
really change my profile picture that often so I was kind of thinking I should just change
it and so um, I was like, “Why don’t I just do it for prom because everyone else is.”

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Marie:** And like I’d get the opportunity for a lot of people to like it because a lot of
people were like liking pictures so, and Lucy said she liked that one so I just like decided
to do that one and that’s, and I felt like that was like the best one.

**Interviewer:** So you talked to Lucy and like discussed like, “Should I post this one?”
[Laughs]

**Marie:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So she’ll give you advice on,

**Marie:** I feel like it’s like, she is like easy for, say I’m thinking like, “That’s a good
picture,” but like, she, I feel like, I don’t know so she’s not the only opinion in the world
but she can look at it [inaudible] be like, “That’s weird, too,” you know…

Lucy played a big part in the selection of Marie’s profile picture. First, Lucy was
planning to post her own prom picture, which gave Marie the idea to look for a picture
too. Then Lucy told Marie which one she liked best, at which point Marie “just like
decided to do that one.” Only after she received Lucy’s approval did Marie say “I felt
like that was like the best one.” Marie makes it clear that she relies on Lucy’s opinion for her image selection and implies that she also wants reassurance from a friend that the selected image does not violate the rules, or in her words, is not “weird too.” In talking to Marie I got the sense that she is a harsh judge of her appearance and having Lucy tell her that it was a good picture made her see it in a more positive light. While feedback generally comes in the form of likes after the image is posted, in some ways Marie’s meaning making begins with Lucy’s approval before the image is even posted. She picks the image because she has already received a positive peer response to it. Because of this type of pre-posting feedback, it is not surprising that girls do not spend much time discussing the image after it is posted; the initial relational work sets the frame for the individual work that comes after posting.

Rule #2: Likes Signal Popularity; do anything to get them

Girls in the study are unabashed in their quest for likes. If girls are operating on a “self in relation” trajectory of development, then likes are important for them because they reaffirm their social belonging on some level. They may giggle about some of the methods they use to “up their likes” and talk snidely about girls who use these a bit too often, but they all have a long list of strategies that they feel comfortable using to get more likes. Again, because of the norm of authenticity, they have to be a bit discreet and cannot pursue all of the likes strategies at once, but they are all at their disposal. Table 1 outlines the likes strategies that the girls I interviewed either employ themselves or see other girls utilize. There are others that could be mentioned; however these are by far the
most commonly referenced in the interviews and focus groups. They noted that you
generally have a 5 hour window in which your image will be seen before it goes far
enough down the newsfeed that it will lose visibility. They begin using the second set of
strategies in earnest after the 5 hours elapses to try to “up their likes.”

Table 2: Girls’ Strategies to Increase Likes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Posting Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal Likes</td>
<td>Like other people’s pictures so that they will feel “obligated to like yours back”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose Photomates Wisely</td>
<td>Taking pictures with “high likes” people will get you more likes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim for Peak Visibility</td>
<td>Post your images during peak Facebook times (weeknights 7pm-12am) in order to maximize the number of friends who will see it within the critical window.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlist Friends</td>
<td>Most girls said that they felt obligated to like and/or comment on their close friends’ pictures. These will generally be your first likes, so girls did say that they might let a close friend know that they posted a new picture to ensure that they get some early likes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Strategies for Increasing Likes After the Critical Window has Passed

| Tag yourself | Several days/weeks (although they said 3 days was the average) after the image was posted you can tag yourself in your own picture. This serves no other purpose other than to resurface the image in the newsfeed for visibility. |
| Repost Pictures | Repost a picture so that it resurfaces in the newsfeed. This means more people will see it. |
| Reply to Comments | The image will likely generate a few comments. If you wait a few days to respond to the comments, the picture will again resurface in the newsfeed. |

While we may be skeptical of the extensive work girls do to ensure likes, there is something potentially empowering in these strategies. Utilizing these strategies mean that girls do not just wait to see how their pictures “do”, their word for the number of likes they receive, but rather they have some control over promoting their pictures. While some of this work is totally out of their hands, it was interesting to hear them talk about these strategies as it was clear that the girls believe they really work. While they can giggle about them in conversation with an adult, I cannot help but think these strategies, while overwhelmingly time consuming, do in fact give them some control over the
outcome. You can choose how much effort you want to put in to getting likes and while you cannot manufacture them, you can at least increase your likelihood.

**Rule #3: Status Trumps Rules**

In the focus group conversations it was very clear that girls allow certain high status people more leeway in following the rules. While the boys militantly enforce the rules and call out any violator, the girls make it pretty clear that high status girls can violate the rules without facing the same types of negative consequences that lower status girls would face; in this way, status confers privilege to violate the rules. During a focus group conversation about the likes strategies mentioned above, someone shared the example of a popular girl known to many, who ruthlessly employs most, if not all, of the strategies each time she posts a picture. For most girls, the impression this would send is of being inauthentic and trying too hard, which are some of the biggest social violations on Facebook. Yet because of this girl’s high status, she faced no significant consequences for breaking the rules. They all noticed it and mentioned that it was “annoying” because, as one girl put it “especially because she’s a person that already has so many [likes], it’s like why do you have to do that?” But in spite of this annoyance, they acknowledged that they will like her posts and that there are no negative social consequences for her violation of the rules. This is in direct contrast to Jake, who had to shut down his Facebook in 9th grade because he was bullied for “trying too hard” to be popular, the exact behavior in which this popular girl engages. While I think there is an important gender difference in the way that meanness plays out on Facebook, I do think
there is also something about the importance of the social hierarchy for girls. The girls made it clear that the freedoms certain girls are allowed does not apply to lower status girls, which implies to me that the Facebook rules are more strictly adhered to by lower status girls because of the social categories of worth that exist.

**Rule #4: Indirect Meanness**

Echoing offline gender norms that expect girls to be nice, I observed no incidents of direct meanness amongst the girls’ interactions on Facebook. But in talking with them in the interviews and focus groups it became clear that they are mean; they just engage in subtle, indirect meanness. Girls will crop others out of pictures or purposely not like or comment on postings, which is a big deal given the reciprocity norms that girls have regarding likes. Girls similarly talk about feeling sad when they see that they were excluded from a social event. Girls also are harsh judgers of other girls’ posts, especially when it comes to bikini shots. These images while almost a necessity are a bit risky because they can easily send the wrong impression of trying too hard. This is challenging as there is some disagreement amongst the girls about what actually constitutes trying too hard with bikini shots. I showed the picture below to the girls in the interviews with the girls to get them to talk freely about images they had not posted themselves (Figure 48).
Opinions about this image ranged from it being “forced” and “annoying” given that they are not actually at the beach and therefore just “wanted to have a picture to show,” to the sense that it was an acceptable vacation picture because there are “palm trees in the back.” As one girl said “…so I think the fact that they’re sort of being like casual like their arms around each other, it just seems more like friends on the beach rather than like trying to you know get attention.” I wonder if awareness of these judgments may be the reason why girls most often post bikini images that are both playful and sexy, as these may be less likely to be judged as trying too hard.

Girls also can be mean by using Facebook and cell phone technology to engage in offline meanness. Girls take screen shots of Facebook interactions to share with others at
a later date, such as Kate’s screen shots of Peter’s posts that she shared with the focus group. Jake, the boy who had been a victim of Facebook bullying, mentioned his concern about girls’ taking screen shots of his posts. I was asking him if it was easier to approach people on Facebook because no one will see if you get rejected and he said that is not true because of the ability girls have to screen shot images:

**Interviewer:** People didn’t see it I guess, right? They didn’t see you trying to talk to him and then have it fail.

**Jake:** But that’s also not the case anymore because I know like a bunch of people that are just jerks about it.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Jake:** Like if someone just like takes a crack at someone like, like the girl like screen shots the photo and like sends it to her guy friends.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Jake:** Like so many times,

**Interviewer:** And then it’s like everywhere.

**Jake:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So it’s, okay.

**Jake:** So…

**Interviewer:** Yeah that’s a whole interesting experience to me, like the screen shotting,

**Jake:** Yeah that’s the worst, that’s the worst part.

**Interviewer:** Comments,

**Jake:** Because that’s why I don’t like, that’s why I rather prefer in person.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.
Jake: You know like, if like, if a girl isn’t into me like after I go up to her or something like that it’s like, “Oh okay, whatever.”

Interviewer: Just move on, yeah.

Jake: If I show like I don’t care, it’s not gonna,

Interviewer: Right.

Jake: Like as long as she’s not like, “Look at that kid.”

Interviewer: Right.

Jake: Whereas like, if I was like, if I like message a girl that I saw at a party, never even talked to and I was like, “Hey do you remember me?” or something like,

Interviewer: Right, right.

Jake: Kind of like,

Interviewer: Like trying very hard.

Jake: A position of weakness.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah I agree.

Jake: And then it’s just like, don’t respond, shows that they read it, screen shot it, like send it to a bunch of her girlfriends,

Interviewer: I know.

Jake: Or whatever you get seen as like a loser of some sort of, something like that.

Interviewer: I know.

Jake: So I wouldn’t put myself in that position in the first place.

Jake implies he would never approach a girl on Facebook because it puts you in “a position of weakness” where she can take your words and then share them with everyone to make you look like “a loser of some sort.” This form of behind the back gossiping was particularly upsetting to Jake and he goes on to refer to them as “mean spirited” actions.
I think his word choice here is interesting as it implies a power dynamic at play; girls seem to be able to wield this, albeit mean spirited, technique to gain the position of power. Although Jake wants to suggest that he has never experienced this, his emotional language and detailed description suggests that he has some direct knowledge with it, either personally or through a friend.

Naturally though, this power play is connected to the social boundaries. The group has the power to cut out others. The girls would not screen shot a high status boy’s message. Rather, it is someone like Jake, who has struggled on Facebook in the past, who becomes the victim of the boundary work. The boundaries are dynamic and therefore often ambiguous which means that feelings can be hurt. This can certainly happen to boys and girls, however when it is girls being “mean spirited,” it is never overt meanness. Rather they engage in indirect meanness to signal group boundaries without actually saying anything that could be considered cruel by an outside observer. The boys, who are certainly mean, are more obviously so, which creates interactions and dialogues around meanness. The girls’ actions are never addressed. In all of the interviews girls said that they never say anything when they are excluded or hurt on Facebook. As Kate says, “I don’t know. I feel like if you feel bad about it you’re probably not going to talk about it. But, yeah, I don’t know. Like yeah, I don’t know. It can happen like if you weren’t invited to a party and you see a ton of pictures and just like that feels bad, but I can’t remember any specific time.” Again, the internalization process happens largely alone.
Rule #5: A Feminine and Sexualized Presentation of the Self

Feminine images dominate girls’ Facebooks. Although many types of images could be coded as feminine, I was interested in those that combine both feminine and sexual tones—the overly posed, cleavage shots, or bikini shots in particular. I focused on these because they are so prevalent in the images that I observed. Indeed, with the exception of pictures with friends, these feminine and sexual images make up the majority of girls’ visual representations of the self (Figures 49 and 50). Although only one of my focus groups with girls was conducted over the summer, 12 of the 13 girls had bikini pictures.
And while the younger girls had fewer images coded as sexual body shots, all the girls had them. Figure 50 is Michelle, a 9th grade girl’s version.

![Figure 50](image)

As a result of this, the girls’ images were for the most part, virtually identical in theme.

While the surface self is the focus, the survey data indicates that these girls are well rounded; according to survey responses 54 percent of the girls played on two or more sports teams during the previous year and many spoke in their interviews about involvement in other extracurriculars. Yet comparatively very few of these images were prevalent on Facebook. In Chapter 3, I talked about the emphasis on the surface self, which for girls translates into an emphasis on appearance and the body. Thus one important way gender is performed on Facebook (West and Zimmerman 1987) is to highlight appearance and sexuality, which may be a reflection of where they are
developmentally. In the interviews it was clear that these images were prevalent because they result in a lot of likes; your friends like flattering pictures of you, and boys may like these as well, whereas boys are less likely to like girls’ image with friends. And given the circular logic of Facebook, these likes then mean that you look good. Thus, you enact a feminine and sexualized role for the picture that emphasizes your appearance in order to receive confirmation that you are in fact pretty. Although it is beyond the scope of this research, it would be interesting to examine the long term effect on adolescent girls of enacting this type of gendered role.

**Boys Rules: Be Real, Masculine, and Stupid Funny**

In my analysis I was able to decode fewer gendered rules for boys. This may be true for two reasons: 1) traditional gender norms may mean that boys have more leeway in following social rules and, 2) while many of the girls’ pictures were identical both to other pictures they posted (i.e. several flattering posed shots with small groups of friends) and to other girls’ pictures, boys’ images are more varied than girls’ images in general, perhaps because of the aforementioned reason. Because of this, it makes it harder to pinpoint specific gendered rules for boys. I asked the boys during the interviews about the image that they are trying to create on Facebook and the majority of them said that they just wanted to come across as a “normal” kid. Peter said that now that he is headed to college and future classmates will be looking at his Facebook before meeting him in person, he has started to think about the type of first impression a stranger might get from his Facebook:

**Peter:** And I started thinking about that, I was like … like I wonder what my profile looks like from like an outsider …
Interviewer: Yeah, an outsider’s …

Peter: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you come to any conclusions? Like do you have any …?

Peter: I don’t know, I hoped I was just a normal kid. [laughing]

Interviewer: Nothing that was majorly offensive or …

Peter: Yeah.

Matt said that his only goal is “not trying to make myself [look like] an idiot.”

What is interesting about these goals—just looking “normal” or trying not to look like “an idiot”—is that they sound really banal and obvious. However, in examining boys’ images I think that looking “normal” is their code for wanting to look authentically masculine and funny, i.e. the standard boy attributes—liking sports, girls, and being comfortable looking like the funny clown from time to time. As with girls, all of these attributes are projected through the surface self presentation and lead boys to enact hetero-normative gender scripts.

Rule #1: Girls, Sports, Partying and other Norms of Masculinity:

The “normal” boy that participants’ speak about is a masculine boy. Similar to girls, even if boys have multiple sides to themselves, their most masculine activities, usually involving sports, will dominate their Facebook images. Charlie, a senior in the study talked about how he was very involved in Irish dancing in his hometown, which he never shared with his classmates for fear of ridicule. He said that he managed this by
using the untag feature on Facebook to ensure that the dance pictures did not surface on his newsfeed.

**Charlie:** One thing I remember from the last question, so actually a very specific thing that I don’t realize that I forgot. So for a while up until my sophomore year I um, did some competitive Irish step dancing.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Charlie:** So it’s a weird story, so I, but I didn’t tell anyone at Pierce about it.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Charlie:** It’s sort of like my little secret.

**Interviewer:** [Laughs].

**Charlie:** So I had my Quincy friends,

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Charlie:** And I had my Pierce friends.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Charlie:** And it was like, I was very sure to,

**Interviewer:** To hide,

**Charlie:** To keep everything kosher you know, no crossover because you know I didn’t, you know I was kind of shy about it.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Charlie:** Um, so that was actually one thing where I, where I would purpose, I would like find a way to subtly untag myself in every single like photo from Irish dancing.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Charlie:** But I think you know, I’ve kind of moved beyond that.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.
Charlie: I think in recent years there hasn’t been anything like that but it’s kind of a funny story.

Interviewer: Yeah it’s, so is that because you thought people would make fun of you?
Charlie: I think a little bit like I think some of it, there’s a whole, there’s a really bizarre subculture to it that a lot of people on the outside wouldn’t quite get.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Charlie: And these people that, my Quincy friends were very into it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Charlie: And like they all grew up in this really small Irish community off the, in this little island and they uh, you know I think it would have been just, I didn’t want to bother explaining it to everyone.

Interviewer: Right.

Charlie: But I think at first it was an element of embarrassment.

Interviewer: Okay.

Charlie: But after that it wasn’t so bad.

Interviewer: And did they ever notice, were they ever like, “Why do you keep untagging yourself?”

Charlie: Well yeah, a little bit.

Interviewer: Okay.

Charlie: And I got some, I got some you know,

Interviewer: Yeah.

Charlie: Unhappy people.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Charlie: Because of that, they were offended but I think they more or less understood, “Okay you know you’re a guy who goes to an all guys school, probably don’t want to,”
For Charlie, there was “an element of embarrassment” that lead him to hide the “really bizarre subculture” that his “Quincy friends were very into” from his school friends. Although he never said it outright, he hinted in the conversation that he worried Irish step dancing would be viewed as unmanly, and gendered rules are essential to follow. He used the Facebook technology of untagging to distance himself and thereby control his image. His Irish step dancing friends can still see the images other people posted, however by untagging himself from these images he ensured that his male school friends would not see it. Thus, the same tool that makes the embarrassing photos visible in the first place can be used to limit their damage to one’s personal fable. Charlie did not feel that this was inauthentic and I tend to agree with him; Goffman (1959) would argue that gearing one’s performance, in this case through images, to the perceived audience is what we all do in our everyday lives. The fact that the performance is more permanent on Facebook does not mean it is any less authentic than what happens offline.

Charlie mentioned that a friend does a similar thing with his theater pictures:

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like in general is it more of an emphasis in, because I can’t tell if it’s just the people I’m interviewing are more of the athletic…

**Charlie:** No but I’d say there’s still, like the, I have a friend who, he’s an awesome squash player.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Charlie:** And he is really into theater. And he has, you know, for every, excuse me, one theater picture, he’ll have like 100 squash pictures.

**Interviewer:** Okay yeah that’s what I’m wondering, yeah.

**Charlie:** Even though that’s a big part of his life.

**Interviewer:** Right.
Charlie: And if you talk to him in person,

Interviewer: Right.

Charlie: He wouldn’t be ashamed of that at all but I think online he would.

Interviewer: He’s highlighting a certain side of him.

Charlie: Yeah.

In Charlie’s description of this boy, he notes that he will talk about his love of theater in person, but will minimize the space he gives to theater on his Facebook. Charlie uses the word “ashamed” to describe how this boy would feel if that side of him was highlighted on Facebook, which indicates the power of the masculine presentation of the self. He also notes that it is not just this group of boys who does this, but rather it is his understanding that this is common practice for all boys.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the masculine rules also lead boys to highlight the body, but here it is the body in action, covered or not, through images of athletics or those that highlight muscles. Below are two examples of Peter (Figure 51) and Max (Figure 52) showcasing the body in action.
Figure 51

Figure 52
It also leads boys to showcase pictures with “hot girls, which are considered a status marker with both boys and girls. Peter explained it this way:

Interviewer: The pictures of girls, okay and you don’t have to speak necessarily about yourself, but just in general. Why does that matter? What does that give guys?

Peter: It kind of works two ways.

Interviewer: Okay.

Peter: I think it would boost your image to other guys.

Interviewer: Yup.

Peter: Which I kind of think is actually like the primary reason people do it.

Interviewer: Yup.

Peter: I mean you like, like commanding that respect for like hanging out with girls, hanging out with good looking girls like that.

Interviewer: Yeah, I was gonna ask you that, so it’s sort of, I would assume, right, it would be … you get more of that for the better looking …

Peter: Mhm.

Interviewer: …the girl is, right?

Peter: For sure. Um, and then there’s the other side um, which is commanding respect from other girls.

Interviewer: Right.

Peter: Which is kind of funny.

Interviewer: Right. It’s like …counterintuitive [laughing]

Peter: Yeah, it’s … I mean like some of it might be like a jealousy factor.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Peter: But some of it also might just be like, look, I’m like a … social person …
Peter uses powerful language to describe these images, saying that they are “commanding respect” from both boys and girls alike. He acknowledges that it is strange that girls like his pictures with other girls, but he attributes it to the “jealousy factor.” The appeal of these images, like the sports pictures, is that they show that you are part of a high status group as a varsity athlete or a guy who is popular with girls, which affirms your position within the social boundaries. Thus, while they perform gender, they are simultaneously delineating the social group.

Boys also relish the opportunity to make themselves and their male peers look like idiots. Part of this is the masculine norms that dictate that they should not care about looking good in pictures, but I think another component of these idiot pictures is that they can be used to signal social connections. Boys work hard to make their friends look like idiots, not in a mean spirited way, but just as part of male bonding. As Kenny said in his interview “You never let your friends live down the stupid stuff they say.” Thus, even these unflattering pictures serve a purpose for boys on Facebook.

The awkward, but funny picture of Myles below (Figure 53) can be argued to show the “real self” because while it is not posed or flattering, it does send a signal to people; it shows that he is funny and able to joke around, and shows that he is following gender norms as he appears to be unconcerned with his appearance.
Additionally because a friend posted this idiot picture of him, it links him to a social group. In a way, posting idiotic pictures of your friends is a bonding mechanism for boys on Facebook, and it seems to be an important one; this clearly awkward picture was the first thing Myles mentioned in our interview. After I explain the different components of the interview I always reassure my participants that the point is not to catch them doing anything or to make them feel bad, in order to put them at ease. Myles interrupted this introduction to talk about this picture:

**Myles:** There’s actually one photo,

**Interviewer:** No, you’re like embarrassment free,

**Myles:** Did you see the one of me with….?
He goes on to describe in great and convoluted detail the context of this picture; in preparation for his team’s banquet the boys put together a slideshow of embarrassing pictures of all team members. Given that he mentioned this picture immediately and the way he spoke about this image, it was clear that he liked this image a lot. While he knew that he did not look great, (i.e. the appearance aspect of the surface self was not positively highlighted), other important factors of the masculine surface self such as showing his athletic and social connections, were visible from this image. This “real me” goofy image serves an important role in the impression management of the highlights reel by indicating his group membership, and conformity to gender norms on Facebook, even if it is not immediately obvious to the viewer.

In addition to the images you post, the rules of masculinity also apply to your Facebook actions. As mentioned before, boys cannot take pictures themselves, pose overtly in pictures or take selfies because they label these behaviors, and the overt emphasis on appearance they signal, as feminine. This sets up the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy in male relationships, whereby boys compete with and compare themselves to other boys based on how manly they are (Pleck 1982). As such, the boys will not engage in behaviors on Facebook that could be deemed as feminine, and in fact compete to overemphasize the manly image. While this in many ways limits their options, and therefore the number of pictures they have, the boys do still have some control. As mentioned in chapter three, they can engineer situations and get others to take pictures for them; they just have to do so subtly.
Boys also exert a great deal of control over likes. Boys do not like images or posts as frequently as girls do; they say that they like things only when they are very funny, amazing, or show attractive girls. They set this up again as a feminine/masculine dichotomy, whereby it is feminine to like everything and therefore “normal” boys do not like things all the time. But following this gendered rule by withholding likes, which everyone acknowledged is a form of approval, gives them incredible power with girls. The fact that they do not like things all the time means that their likes are rarer, and therefore more meaningful. Many of the girls mentioned that because female friends like everything they post, receiving the rare like from boys actually means something. Kate describes boys’ likes in her interview:

**Interviewer:** What types of images do better with boys?

**Kate:** I think like for me it’s like a much bigger deal if a boy likes it than a girl likes it. And I think boys are more inclined to like, like actual pretty shots, which like I wouldn’t have thought, but then they actually do.

**Interviewer:** When you say pretty do you mean the person looks pretty or the scene is pretty?

**Kate:** No like the person.

**Interviewer:** Less inclined to like?

**Kate:** More inclined to like close up pretty pictures of you.

**Interviewer:** But less inclined in general to like..

**Kate:** Oh definitely yes. Girls like everything.

**Interviewer:** Okay so a boy it feels like means it more.

**Kate:** Like yeah, it means like, oh this is an actual pretty shot of me.
Kate makes it clear that likes from boys matter more to her because “girls like everything” thereby making their likes less helpful feedback; Kate actually does not learn anything new from her female friends’ likes because their frequent likes could not possibly reflect their actual opinions. In contrast, Kate says that a like from a boy means that “this is an actual pretty shot of me.” Boys avoid liking things to appear more masculine and the result of this is that girls seek out their approval even more, thereby reinforcing traditional gender scripts and power dynamics inherent in the female quest for male approval.

**Rule #2: Authenticity as an Impression Strategy**

Authenticity was presented as a general rule in the previous chapter, however it is worth highlighting here because of the ways that boys can utilize authenticity as a means of downplaying the work that they do on Facebook. By overemphasizing the authentic presentation of the self, boys actually downplay the impression management work they do. I gave the example of Noah in the previous chapter as a boy who says that he has no agenda or strategy because he just shows his true self on Facebook. When asked if he thinks about how he will be perceived by others he says “I don’t really care that much.” However, at the same time, given the images he selects, the posing that he does, and the language that he uses, it is clear that he is working hard to create this image of someone who could care less. But Noah uses the feigned disinterest and authenticity norm to downplay the work that he is actually doing on Facebook. Nonetheless, images such as the one below send important messages to others: he is with two girls and they all appear
to be intoxicated (Figure 54). And as is well documented by the boys, appearing not to care about how you look, partying, and being pictured with girls are three key markers of manliness. All of these messages send important signals about Noah’s social status. Again, none of these things may be true, but that is the message that this picture sends.

![Figure 54](image)

Jeff’s picture below sends a similar message of “I don’t care,” while simultaneously signaling an image of power and status (Figure 55). This image also includes an interesting reference to Jeff as a “Queen,” which although on the surface seems to be a check on his masculinity, is actually a confirmation of male friendships that will be discussed in final rule.
I believe that the ways in which boys enact the authenticity rule is important for their impression management work. Claiming that they are just showing the “real” me, allows them to be more indirect in their impression management work. This is not to suggest that their quest for authenticity is disingenuous; I do think they care a lot about being authentic as is evident by the policing they do of their peers. However, I think that the way authenticity is bounded with norms of masculinity allows them to be much more subtle in their impression management work. It is only by talking with them about their images that it becomes clear just how aware and strategic boys are, despite the fact that on the surface their images may appear to be less traditionally flattering, organized, or even helpful in creating a self narrative.
Rule #3: Mean in a Funny Way

When boys violate the rules of protocol and are cruel to each other they get policed by others. In a nod to “Throwback Thursdays” where you post funny and/or embarrassing pictures of yourself on Facebook, Kenny posted the picture below of him playing baseball as a young boy (Figure 56).

![Figure 56](image)

Kenny received several comments asking if it was him, and making friendly jokes, and then one boy posted a YouTube clip of a severely disabled young boy with the comment “hey guys it ken!” Over the course of the next several hours four boys responded back about the inappropriateness of this comment, saying “the line…it has been crossed,” “you can’t say that Mike,” “mike thats not okay on so many levels,” and “yeah smith that is not okay.” Eventually Kenny responded himself saying “you dont say that about a mentall[y] disabled kid.” The original poster eventually responded saying “Guys calm down I was saying the[y] look similar.” While Mike’s comments are inappropriate and
mean spirited at best, what is interesting to me is that this moment of obvious bullying is
so quickly and effectively policed by Kenny’s peers and eventually Kenny himself.
When I asked Kenny about this in the interview he said that this boy has given him
trouble like this for a while, but noted that it does not bother him. He also noted the
importance of his friends stepping in:

**Kenny:** So when they saw it they were like, “Okay you’re being an asshole so just stop.”

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Kenny:** So um, they kind of helped me with that because they, I think they saw that I
was,

**Interviewer:** Like they knew the back story with him.

Kenny felt that his friends were there to help him and stand up for him. In a sense,
although the comment was awful, the fact that it was made publicly allowed Kenny to
find support in his peer group, which makes for a more positive outcome than may have
been possible in a face to face interaction. Comments that are offensive and hurtful to the
poster were routinely called out by boys during the course of my observations. These are
in contrast to the funny or sarcastically mean comments that are regularly used and
appreciated by boys. In response to Chris’ image below (Figure 57), one boy commented
“looks like your posing to take a dump on the 20 yard line” to which another boy
responded “better than a piss on the bench!” Both of these comments were very well
received by viewers and received their own likes. Indeed many of the sarcastic
comments received more likes than the original picture. This interchange is funny and not
damaging to Chris and in the interview he told me he thought the whole exchange was
hilarious.
Rule #4: Homophobic Comments to Confirm Masculinity

Gay slurs, like the one in Jeff’s picture calling him the “Queen of deepthroat,” were also deemed acceptable by the boys, and these comments were mostly targeted to close friends. Research indicates that this is a common occurrence amongst teen boys. In Pascoe’s (2007) works she writes that they engage with the “threatening specter of the faggot” to “affirm to themselves and each other that they are straight (51),” and importantly not feminine or weak. Thus, the gay comments are not only acceptable, but are actually reserved for straight males to use as a way to affirm their heterosexuality. I saw fag and gay comments so frequently that I asked every boy about them in the follow up interviews. While they each acknowledged that they know it is wrong, they explained it away by saying that it is “how we talk,” “what guys say,” or “we aren’t calling the person gay, more the action.” They all made it clear that they would never use this language with someone who was actually gay, but rather use it to describe close friends.
When I asked Kenny in the interview about what he thinks when he sees these comments he said “I see it, and I’m just like, “Yeah they’re really good friends that like messing with each other.” He went on to say that he understands: “I, I, ‘cause being a guy I can see why they’re saying it like when you’re best friends with another guy you just rip on him..And when, but you don’t call anyone else faggot, you don’t say that.”

Chris’ picture below, which was part of a whole series of formal pictures posted by a girl received the comment “two biggest fags in the school” by another boy (Figure 58).

![Figure 58](image)

Although this comment seems to echo Pleck’s (1981) notion of men competing over manliness, Chris was fine with it, explaining:

**Interviewer:** Okay alright um, alright so this one, this was the one, this got a comment of um, oops, there, of um, you guys being the two biggest fags in the school,

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay so,
Chris: That’s just, that was our best friend joking around.

Interviewer: Okay so that’s what I wanted to ask you, so does, does that kind of comment and thing like that happen more amongst like close friends?

Chris: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Chris: You never like, like say this is our rival,

Interviewer: Yeah.

Chris: You’d never go on like a [school rival] kid’s photo and be like, “Oh you’re a fag,”

Interviewer: Right okay, so it’s mostly your close friends and why do you think, what is it about this picture that made him want to say that?

Chris: Uh, I don’t know, probably just trying to give us a hard time.

Interviewer: Okay, ‘cause the, like you’re dressed up? Or just like in general it’s you two and therefore,

Chris: Just in general trying to put each other down, just joking around.

Chris notes that the comment came from their really good friend and that he was just joking around with them. I think Chris accepts the gay comment because it is a strategy boys use to delineate boundaries around masculinity. They all said that they would not use the word to describe a gay person. Thus, by using this word to describe a friendship between two heterosexual males, they can reconfirm their masculinity despite their closeness, both emotional and physical, as in the above mentioned picture. It sends the message that we may be all dressed up, sitting close together, and be really good friends, but we are not feminine. So interestingly, the word fag is used to assert masculinity.
Gendered Categories of Worth

Walther (2008) argues that Facebook just reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. While this may be the end result, I think the reason why this happens is because the categories of worth in adolescence are gendered in a way that values femininity in girls and masculinity in boys. The strategic impression management work then becomes about asserting and enacting these gender roles as well. The girls emphasize femininity in image (bikini shots) and actions (comments and likes to friends). The boys do the same, emphasizing masculinity in image (sports, pictures with girls) and actions (not liking images, appearing not to care, and sarcastic meanness). To show these they must be doing these things (i.e. posing in bikinis, coordinating pictures with attractive girls, etc). Ultimately this may lead us to Walther’s (2008) end result of social media reinforcing gender stereotyping.

In addition to looking great and accumulating likes through their impression work, following the rules is important to both girls and boys because it confirms your place within the boundaries of the social group. The symbolic categories of worth are defined by gender in adolescence; femininity/attractiveness is more worthy in girls, and masculinity/humor is more valued for boys. As a result, the rules must be gendered in order for teens to ensure that their actions fall within the social boundaries outlined by the group. Thus, gender work simultaneously demarcates gender and the social groups.

Ultimately, I believe there are certain story types that are more powerful in the creation of the fable than others; political awareness or travel were mentioned by participants as showing that a person was engaged and doing “cool” things, but these did
not seem to affect the fable or confirm one’s position in the social group. In contrast, the
gender story seems to have significant influence on one’s fable and the power of the
gendered rules show that gender plays an important role in affirming one’s position in the
status group. The body and signals of masculinity or femininity are important ways to
define the self and affirm your position in the social hierarchy. The key gendered stories
emphasize traditional gender scripts, which means that in many ways, Facebook is simply
providing teens a new way to enact traditional gender roles and scripts. Thus, the
traditional processes of gendered self definition have not changed significantly since
West and Zimmerman (1987), Gilligan (1982; 1987) and Butler (1990) wrote thirty or
forty years ago.

The creation and constant affirmation of categories of worth and social
boundaries, which takes place on the front stage of Facebook, have important
implications for how people feel about themselves. If likes mean you are pretty, then the
number of likes you receive will be a judgment on your looks. As a result, meanings are
derived from the external fable. While the last two chapters have focused on the creation
of the external Facebook personal fable, what remains to be explored in the final chapter
is how these meanings are internalized and the impact that this process may have on the
development of a tentative, authentic self.
CHAPTER 7: THE SOCIAL MEDIA SELF

This chapter will first briefly summarize the analysis outlined in chapters 1-6 and then move on to present my interpretive theory of adolescent development in a social media context. The experience of presenting the self on social media has important implications for adolescents, and as I have shown in the preceding chapters, these implications can serve to either aid or derail their developmental processes. Work that is normally done internally, crafting the fable and assessing feedback on the self, now has a public presentation. Through the technology that emphasizes a visual presentation of the self, Facebook provides a public space for self reflection and dialogue; it allows you to literally visualize the presentation of self and the feedback you receive on it. And ultimately what I believe is so important about this social media experience is the inner work that adolescents do to craft the presentation that represents the “real me” and then make sense of the feedback. This inner dialogue serves to affirm or negate the development of the self, and because it plays out in this new social media context, I believe it has the potential to impact adolescents in different ways. This chapter will end by presenting the limitations of this work and potential applications for future research in the field.

The Social Media Self: The Internalization of the Fable Work

The preceding chapters outlined the process through which the adolescent personal fable gets externalized on Facebook as I conceptualize it. With a few notable exceptions, this work is done in a thoughtful and strategic way through impression management work. The most important external presentation work adolescents do is in
crafting their important profile pictures, as these images comprise the first impression that is seen on Facebook. These profile pictures emphasize the highlights reel version of the self, much like the photo albums on our shelves or the pictures that adorn our walls at home. Some of the highlights are obvious—flattering pictures, celebrations, etc—and some are more subtle, signaling symbolic or social capital via activities or social connections. But as much as these images may be strategic in their emphasis of the highlights reel, for the teens I interviewed they are also important because they see these photos as representing aspects of the “real me.” While they know that everyone selects the images that “document us being awesome,” they want these images to showcase their authentic self.

This desire to present what I call the authentic self, and they term the “real me,” on Facebook is compelling probably for all of us, but particularly so for adolescents, who are engaged in the process of identity development. The chance to document the self at this moment on Facebook—and to do so in a medium that allows you to think through and craft your performance “alone in your room in your pajamas” as Samantha described it—is especially compelling. The ways that they use the technology allow them to control everything from the timing to the presentation itself. At this stage in the life course when the self is uncertain, the time and control that the Facebook technology gives them makes this a natural and advantageous choice for adolescents. This does not mean that what they present on Facebook is inauthentic, but rather that through Facebook they can create a public version of the self narrative. As soon as the self narrative, which traditionally exists only in our head, enters the public realm of Facebook it is altered by
the awareness of the audience in the form of Facebook friends and the interactions with these friends.

Because of this, the authenticity that is showcased on Facebook is actually a public authenticity constrained by adolescents’ social media rules. The rules, which are discussed amongst peers only when someone in the social circle violates them, are critical because they guide the impression management work and ensure that teens feel safe in their presentation. As a result of the rules, they know how their images will be perceived before they are posted to Facebook. In this front stage performance work, they are completely aware of the audience and use the rules to guide them to a successful presentation of the Facebook self.

The authentic performance is also bounded by gender scripts as the importance of enacting gendered roles on Facebook that highlight masculinity in boys and femininity in girls is profound. Indeed almost all of the rules and work done on Facebook is filtered through a gender-scripted performance; while everyone needs to look good on Facebook, what it means to look good is highly gendered. Gender rules dictate that actions or behaviors such as taking pictures and posing in certain ways are “girly” and therefore off limits for boys. This reduces the number of available images boys have from the outset. The need to highlight one’s adherence to gender norms and roles is central through every phase of the Facebook front stage presentation, from image creation to image posting.

The Facebook performance and the interactions with others that the performance inspires both work to signal one’s symbolic and social capital to others. A successful performance indicates that you can follow the rules of the group, which demonstrates
social awareness. Flattering images showcase physical appeal. Other images highlight your group membership and belonging, whether obviously through posed pictures with friends, or more subtly by showcasing attendance at high status events or by posting goofy pictures with friends. And finally, the interactions that your performance generates, in the form of likes and comments, make a clear statement about one’s social relevance. In the follow up interviews every participant stated with conviction that they feel comfortable determining a person’s social position by looking at their pictures and the number of likes they receive. No one went so far as to say that a Facebook presentation could improve offline social standing, and many were wary of using the term popularity in any context; however, their statements indicate that in addition to telling one’s personal fable, the Facebook presentation also signals adolescents’ symbolic capital to themselves and to all of their Facebook friends. In reality the Facebook presentation serves two purposes: it allows teens to present their evolving self in a public realm while also showcasing their symbolic capital to all of their friends. A powerful combination! It is no surprise then, and really not something to be trivialized, that some talk of checking Facebook upwards of 50 times a day.

The question that remains though is what happens next; they do the performance of the “real me” now and see the feedback they receive, but what do they do with this information? How does it impact them and to what end? In this final chapter I will layout my interpretive theory of adolescent social media use that divides the Facebook process into two interconnected phases: the creation and live phases. Here I will present the effects of work in both phases, but highlight in particular the creation phase as that is the
real contribution of this work to the field. I will argue that the self reflection social media can provide for adolescents is altering their path to self development. When successful, the self reflection that the Facebook presentation provides before images are even posted, has the potential to build self confidence and social competency for teens. I believe that this is a major reason that social media is such a draw for adolescents, and one that is often overlooked in the sociological and other literature on media, which tends to focus on the live phase of the Facebook process.

Adolescent Development in a Social Media Context

Development is an interactional process between the self and the social context, however now interactions can take place offline and on social media. This means that teens really have two contexts to both manage and explore, an experience that was described by participants as freeing or stressful, and oftentimes as both. Thinking of social interactions as occurring in two separate contexts is helpful in illustrating the differences between the two. Turkle’s work (1984; 1995; 2011) popularized this juxtaposition of real world vs. online world, and her interpretation has come to represent the dominant narrative in the field. In her most recent work, Turkle argues that technology (not limited to social media) allows for the “emergence of a new state of the self, itself split between the screen and the physical reality...” (2011: 16). Turkle’s work in the field, launched twenty years before the creation of Facebook was prescient and thoughtful; she was truly the first to see how this technology would come to consume so much of our lives and impact our daily social interactions. And indeed anyone who
observes young people in a group, all sitting together but fixated on their phones, can readily accept her hypothesis that we are indeed “alone together.”

And Turkle’s body of work is important as it highlights the dangerous implications of technological dependence on social interactions. The challenge though is that Turkle’s findings have been generalized to explain the entire adolescent online experience, which I believe warrants caution. Turkle’s methods, particularly in her more recent works, focused on interviewing college aged students, most of whom are students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This is a sample that is not wholly generalizable to the adolescent population. First, I do not believe that data on college students can be readily applied to younger adolescents as there is no data that suggests that the experience of college students mimics that of high school teens. Additionally, studying students who attend an elite technology university like MIT may not be representative of the entire population, particularly when it comes to technology use. Turkle finds that these students cannot break free from their technological devices, but it is highly probably that students at MIT have a predilection towards technology regardless of its type.

Finally, as Gopnik’s 2011 Slate article suggests, there is a difference between reporting on a disturbing behavior and understanding the mechanisms at work behind the scenes and its ultimate impact: “The trouble [with Turkle’s finding] is that it doesn't tell us what those effects actually are. The children she talks to are remarkably thoughtful, but they are also contradictory: Robots are sort of people, but then again they're just machines; cell phones make parents more intrusive, or maybe more distant.” As boyd
(2013) argues, really “it’s complicated”, but the focus of Turkle’s work is to warn us of the negatives. Gopnik (2011), skeptical of the assumption of the negative effects of technology, goes on to argue that “The year before you were born looks like Eden, the year after your children were born looks like Mad Max…Is the teenager who comes home from school and IMs her friends while she updates her Facebook page really much worse off than the one who came home and watched Gilligan's Island reruns?” My findings suggest that this new generation of Facebook teens may actually be better off than previous generations of teens who came home and watched television. Instead of mindlessly watching Gilligan’s Island, she is doing some serious presentation and self development work that unfortunately get masked behind bikini pictures. While Turkle’s (2007, 2011) methodology and hypothesis led her to see this new “self splitting” in its negative way (i.e. you take yourself out of real world interactions to post bikini pictures), my work led me to see this from a different perspective.

It is important to note that while there is a lot of other work out there on social media use, Turkle’s body of work and perspective has come to dominate public thinking about social media. Turkle’s warning is serious and in many ways valid, but my methodology, which included an observation period, image analysis, and pointed follow up interviews focused on what I observed on Facebook, brought me to a less uniformly negative conclusion. I do not think that Turkle is wrong to argue that technology can take away from offline interactions, but my interview data suggests that the assumption that this is uniformly negative may not apply to my participants. My findings suggest that the teens do not have offline lives that are separate and distinct from their online
lives, at least not when it comes to social media. My participants see their lives as comprising both an offline and social media component and do not think or act in a way that suggests social media is a place where reality is suspended.

In the focus groups I asked questions like Turkle’s, which focused on their opinions about social media use. These general questions revealed many of Turkle’s concerns; they check Facebook often, at least several times a day, they report that it is stressful at times (57 percent), they seek to accumulate likes, and they do so by sometimes posting drinking or bikini pictures. On the surface, these answers are consistent with Turkle’s findings. For her the “phantom limb” of technology creates insecurities and superficial connections amongst adolescents: “They nurture friendships on social network sites and then wonder if they are among friends. They are connected all day, but not sure if they have communicated. They become confused about companionship” (2011: 17). Turkle’s work serves as a cautionary narrative warning the reader that adolescents’ hyper-commitment to technology has diminished their “real” connections, which for her must take place offline. And quite honestly, the initial focus group data would not present drastically different findings. But these questions focus on the live phase and represent the surface story. My new methodology enabled me to observe and analyze their Facebook images and talk to them directly about their images. Through this process I came to see that preceding the posting and waiting for likes is an important and thoughtful phase of the Facebook process, what I call the creation phase. My findings indicate a need to expand the narrative in the field to account for the creation phase that happens offline in anticipation of posting the image; I fully agree with Turkle that the
technology has become another appendage for adolescents, but my data do not lead me to believe that this “phantom limb” has left the younger adolescents confused about friendships, communication, or the self.

Rather, they deserve far more credit for the work they do on social media, and there needs to be room in the field for the positive effects of social media’s use to be reflected more in the theoretical frameworks. While the experience is not uniformly positive, at least for those who can follow the rules and execute an accurate performance, the power of using the public space to work through self development and create an authentic presentation of the self, can be powerful. My participants note that there are times when things happen on Facebook, such as receiving a like from a “random kid from elementary school” that they do not know what to do with, but for the most part they are pretty clear on where their friendships stand via the transfer of offline social capital to Facebook. And they are certainly sure that they have communicated; the effort they put into the performance, their awareness of how the performance will land even before the audience even sees it, and the complete desire to present the authentic self on Facebook, which they all share, leads me to believe that social media is an important tool for communicating with their peers.

Beruk does this very clearly in the following picture where he showcases his connection to both his Ethiopian and Muslim cultures through his dress and his American culture in his socks (Figure 59). When I asked him about this he talked about using Facebook to show more sides of himself; while he may not come to school in Ethiopian dress, he can showcase his culture on Facebook.
It is important to Beruk to be seen as more than just a prep school kid, which highlights important class distinctions. We spoke in the interview about how he strategizes his pictures given that he has “an audience that is very wide” on Facebook. It was clear from this exchange that he is strategic, thoughtful, and simultaneously very authentic in his Facebook presentation:

**Beruk:** And it’s a completely different religion, most people know about it, so like to be able to see that, it’s part of me, like I’m not just molded into that Pierce School kid.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Beruk:** Like that stereotype of a Pierce School [kid],

**Interviewer:** Yeah.
**Beruk**: Like I’m more than that, I have something else, so I try to show that as well.

**Interviewer**: Okay.

**Beruk**: Yeah. So like for the pictures it goes like, sometimes like it will relate to like, like people from Pierce will like understand what it is.

**Interviewer**: Yeah.

**Beruk**: Like this one like a lot of Pierce kids might not associate,

**Interviewer**: Right.

**Beruk**: But like my friends that are Muslim or like Ethiopian,

**Interviewer**: Right that’s what I was gonna ask you.

**Beruk**: Will understand that yeah.

**Interviewer**: Okay.

**Beruk**: And so like now my pictures like of me in just a shirt and tie with um, my friends from Pierce at Pierce.

**Interviewer**: Right.

**Beruk**: And so like Pierce kids will know but like they would be like, some kids would be like, “Why are they all wearing dress shirts?”

**Interviewer**: Right, “Why are they all dressed up? Right, okay.

**Beruk**: Stuff like that so,

**Interviewer**: Yeah and that’s what I kind of, I guess what I was trying to get at, do you feel like more like people in your Muslim community?

**Beruk**: Yeah.

**Interviewer**: Or people from you know Ethiopia might be more inclined to comment?

**Beruk**: Like the pictures, yeah definitely.

**Interviewer**: Okay.
Beruk: And some will not understand about them, but I think by now, I think I work on making sure people like understand like that I have,  
Interviewer: Yeah.

Beruk: That it’s not just like, I’m not like one-dimensional. It’s not just, so, so I think people understand like this will like go to what I do and that I go to an all-boys private school.

Interviewer: Right.

Beruk: And then my friends at Pierce know that I’m Muslim, know that I’m,

Interviewer: Right.

Beruk: I make sure that people know that about me so that they understand because I don’t want them just thinking you know, something,

Interviewer: Right.

Beruk: So I think by now especially like, people, freshman year people might have been like,

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beruk: “What the hell is going on?” But by now everyone knows so they’re not like surprised when they see something that’s a little bit different from the norm.

It matters to Beruk that he is not seen as a “stereotype of a Pierce School” kid because he believes that he is “more than that.” He also talks about how kids outside of his school community, who will likely see him in a shirt and tie in a picture, may not understand it. And conversely, school friends may not understand images like the one in Ethiopian dress; in fact he says they might have responded with “What the hell is going on?” But Beruk makes it clear that while they may not understand the image, he can use Facebook to ensure that at least they see his multidimensionality. In this way, Facebook allows Beruk a freedom to showcase more of him than his offline life does; offline it may be
hard for him to show the diverse worlds he operates in to his “wide audience,” but he can
do this on Facebook as it allows him to control his presentation of the self.

Turkle’s (2011) framework is accurate for teens like Jake, who have trouble
following the rules end up with a derailed and inauthentic presentation, and it seems that
these negative cases are the ones that dominate the media coverage. In his interview
Jake’s uncertainty was evident; he wondered whether he had communicated effectively
and mentioned that he preferred to engage offline to avoid being misinterpreted. In my
sample, Jake’s was the lone voice who articulated the narrative that Turkle describes.
But again, Turkle studied a different age group and demographic and her findings may
apply to MIT college students, but they did not resonate with my sample of younger
adolescents. Similarly, my findings are not representative of the entirety of the young
adolescent experience. What I think this work contributes to the field is the need to shift
away from only the negative assumptions about social media that currently dominate the
field of adolescent social media use.

In 2014 boyd offered a counter to the narrative that is most closely associated
with Turkle. In the introduction to her new book It’s Complicated boyd says that she
wrote the book to “describe and explain the networked lives of teens to the people who
worry about them…” (2014: x). From a methodological standpoint, boyd, a Senior
Researcher at Microsoft Research, seeks to bring adolescent voices to the research and
acknowledges this gap in the literature. While Turkle’s work served as a warning, boyd
seeks to offer explanations. boyd’s work serves as an interesting counterpoint to Turkle’s
Alone Together (2011), both in terms of her methods and findings, but interestingly she
offers limited commentary on Turkle’s work; she cites only Turkle’s work from the
1980s and 1990s in her book, ignoring her more recent work, which is a strange omission
given Turkle’s dominance in the field. Although she does not challenge Turkle directly,
ultimately boyd’s interview data leads her to a less alarmist perspective of technology.
Her chapters are organized around the typical concerns of social media: privacy, risky
behaviors, bullying, predators, and she tackles each of these common fears, coming to the
conclusion that “by and large, the kids are all right” (xi). But, as her title indicates, “it’s
complicated,” and not a uniformly beneficial or harmful experience.

Ultimately I agree with boyd and think her work is important in the field as an
opposing narrative to Turkle’s, but I believe that by maintaining a framework that
emphasizes the common themes like bullying and privacy, boyd too does little to expand
the social media narrative in the field. Through the unique methods I employed in this
study I was able to do just that; yes, it is complicated and the kids are all right, but in
addition there is something unique about curating the visual self on social media that
provides teens the space and opportunity for self dialogue that can affirm the evolution of
the self. This time and space is fostered in the creation phase of Facebook and this
notion forms the basis of my sociological theory of adolescent development and social
media, which will be outlined in the remainder of the chapter.

**What Gets Presented: The Evolving Self in the Social Media Context**

The perception of the self can and will change according to experiences (both
online and offline) and over time. As a result, the personal fable that adolescents present
online really documents the evolving self; it allows them to craft the image of the self as
they conceptualize it in that moment; it is the real me now. Because the self is evolving gradually, it requires a lot of attention and time. I think this is one of the reasons that Facebook is such a time intensive draw for adolescents. While they are looking for feedback in the live phase, which I will discuss in the next section, they are also spending a lot of time in the creation phase crafting the self as they see it in that moment. And in some ways, what they describe to me in the interviews is the fun and power they feel in doing this work in consultation with their friends or “alone in their pajamas.”

It is not a stress free experience by any means, but the technology allows for this phase in which they can think through how they want to present the self now, which may be different from prior or later presentations. What is interesting to me is that although they shed the earlier version of the self as they grow; they leave these versions of the self, albeit perhaps deleting the most awkward images, on the public forum of Facebook. They told me that it is a “red flag” if you do not have any old pictures on your Facebook, as it seems like you “did not exist” before then. Thus, as much as they want to show the current highlight reel, they also want to show the old highlight reels. They place value on documenting these versions of self, because the evolution of the self is a key component of their fables; capturing the evolving self on Facebook allows them to say “look how I have changed” and perhaps even explains the obsession they all share with showing baby pictures, which universally receive a lot of likes on Facebook. Lucy said these baby pictures are appealing “cause it’s cute you know and…like a little different age when you can actually see them in it…especially people that are annoying now and act like such a teenager it’s like “aw that was them once.” They like to see others’ evolving selves, and
I think they also really like to see their own evolution. Ultimately these depictions of the evolving self are one of the reasons that they see the Facebook presentation as authentic; their images show changes, growth, and even some slip ups, but they leave them there because documenting the evolving self in this way showcases their development, which may serve to build confidence.

This theory of the evolving self and the time and effort that adolescents spend in documenting it on Facebook also suggests a gap in the current socio-biological research on the adolescent brain. Research has shown that the slow development of the frontal cortex in adolescence leads to less impulse control and self reflection (Cooney 2010; The Teen Brain 2008). These findings, while well supported via scientific testing, have been applied to Facebook to suggest that teenagers post images and comments with no forethought or awareness of consequences. While my research does not discount any of the brain research findings, it does suggest that the findings may not be generalizable to their Facebook experiences as a whole. While images and comments that lack forethought and judgment were evident on my participants’ Facebooks, they did not outnumber the highly strategic and thoughtful presentations that my participants presented. Because the brain research has become such a powerful narrative in the field of adolescent development, I believe researchers are at risk of making assumptions about adolescent behaviors that discount the work teens do on social media and the awareness they have of their evolving self and its online presentation. This research shows that they are capable of making thoughtful choices, which is perhaps made easier because the Facebook technology allows them some time and space to think. Particularly in the fact
that they spend so much of their time in the creation phase. Although beyond the scope of this research, it does posit the question of whether the technology has the potential to alter the brain, or at the very least heighten this awareness of self in adolescents.

**Feedback and the Evolving Self**

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, at a micro level, adolescent development is influenced by social interactions, which take place offline, on social media, or as my participants reported, sometimes online and offline simultaneously. As a result, adolescents receive feedback from both their online and offline social interactions. This means that the interactions that take place offline can affect the Facebook fable (i.e. what you are able to present), the interactions that your posts generate (i.e. likes and comments) and how you process this experience (i.e. internalization of the feedback). The same can be said for the influence of Facebook feedback interactions on offline interactions, because if social interactions impact adolescent development then the same must be said about social media interactions.

While experiences offline and on social media are interactive and mutually influential on adolescent development, there are important differences between these two types of interactions. These differences are particularly pronounced in this creation phase where teens create a strategic and controlled Facebook presentation and then in the ways these experiences are internalized. The way they use the technology in the creation phase allows them to think through the presentation of the self and be far more strategic than they can in offline interactions, which require immediate responses and are less controlled.
Ultimately what is on display on Facebook is the public looking glass self. In Cooley’s (1964) theory of the looking glass self, he argued that individuals develop a sense of self by understanding others’ perceptions of them. In Cooley’s theory the individual uses social interactions to understand how others see him, which then in turn influences how he sees himself. But, in Cooley’s theory, the interpretive work he described was largely individual work. Social media technology has made this work visible to others, thus creating a public looking glass. While social interactions and others’ perceptions (on or offline) still help to form the self, these mirrors are now made public. Thus, the looking glass self is now a public discourse on Facebook. Making these mirrors public may be the draw and danger of social media for adolescents; they have to get the presentation right because it is out there for everyone to see and judge, yet at the same time there is such potential for it all to go wrong. Yet, again as boyd notes, for the most part the “kids are all right” and they manage this well, in these cases the public looking glass can become an opportunity to affirm the evolving self, which has implications for adolescent development theories more broadly. In the next section I will examine the process through which the self can be affirmed on social media. I will argue that the way that adolescents internalize feedback on Facebook via the public looking glass self allows them to build social competency and potentially self confidence.

The Facebook Friend Feedback Loop

The feedback loop from Facebook friends is fairly straightforward, and is received via likes, comments, and other forms of interaction on one’s Facebook. Because the feedback on Facebook is not face to face, it can feel removed and perhaps less
authentic than offline interactions, and therefore is often discounted in the literature. Indeed, this “one to many” communication style can seem “unsubstantial” in many ways because interactions are often brief and broadcast for all Facebook friends to see (Boneva et al 2006). While it is beyond the scope of my data to posit the relative influence of Facebook interactions on the evolving self, my work makes it clear that this feedback is important to adolescents and should not be dismissed as “unsubstantial.” All participants stated that likes are important to them and that feedback, even negative feedback, is better than nothing because it means that you matter, and not just on Facebook, indicating that Facebook showcases social belonging. Literally every image posted on Facebook documents this in some way, whether it is in the pictures they post with friends or the likes and comments they receive. Thus their Facebook allows adolescents to visually document their social capital for their Facebook friends and perhaps as importantly, for themselves.

While they have a preconceived notion of their social capital in their internal narrative irrespective of social media, Facebook’s technology gives them a chance to test out this narrative of their social worth and in most cases confirm their position. In the live phase they can see the interactions that their posts generate, interpret the meanings of the likes they receive, and to use their term, see “how well it does” on Facebook. In the follow up interviews I asked how they felt about seeing likes and other interactions on some of their pictures. Overwhelmingly I found that while a few referenced the importance of other people seeing the number of likes they received, the majority stated that the stress is not about everyone else seeing how many likes you get, but seeing the
number for yourself. Kate reported that she likes to get around 40 likes for her profile pictures. When I asked her why she wanted so many likes she said that that number would “mean that I was in the group.” In other words, the likes would be a visual confirmation of group membership for Kate. For boys, who receive fewer likes in general, the findings are not as straightforward because they cannot use likes as a direct confirmation of social position. However, the goofy and ridiculous pictures that boys post of their friends, such as the one Myles’ friend posted of him on the squash court, serves the same purpose. Kenny described these goofy pictures as “we look like idiots…Like it’s not like we’re trying.” Following masculine norms, he says that they are not trying to send any messages, again this is just the real me, but in reality these boys are actually trying very hard. The goofiness of the tone belies the work the image does to showcase group membership and masculine conformity. When boys post pictures of their friends, even when they look silly, it is as if they are giving the person a like, just done in a way that conforms to masculinity norms on Facebook. While the girls rush to check likes, Myles rushed to tell me about his silly picture, literally interrupting my interview introduction to talk about it, because it is meaningful for him in a similar way.

At the end of my interview with Kenny I asked him about a mean spirited comment a Facebook friend made on one of his images, in which he essentially likened Kenny to someone with significant intellectual and physical disabilities. In particular we talked about the fact that Kenny’s friends stood up for him in their comments to the picture. Kenny reports that their actions “kind of helped me.” Although Kenny never got more than a dozen likes on any of his images, this visible support from friends meant a
great deal to him. While this had the potential to be a self negating experience for Kenny, it turned into an affirming moment, one from which he could derive confidence and feelings of self worth from the peer support he could see via the Facebook technology.

**Facebook as a Mechanism for Inner Dialogue**

I have talked about peer feedback that occurs in the live phase of the Facebook process and how this can be internalized in a way that affirms the evolving self; however, there is another important type of feedback, an internal dialogue that the Facebook presentation cultivates in the initial creation phase. This feedback has been overlooked in the literature largely because of the methods employed in social media research to date. I was able to arrive at this insight because a large portion of the follow up interviews was devoted to the story and meanings of their images, and it is from these stories that I was able understand the hard work they do in anticipation of posting on Facebook. This self dialogue in the creation phase is different from the reflective work adolescents engage in the live phase after they receive peer feedback and make determinations about their presentation. What my findings highlight is that the inner dialogue begins before the image is even posted to the site and is independent, at least in the beginning, from the feedback they receive from others.

The Facebook technology facilitates this inner dialogic process because it is a visual platform; in addition to showing the personal fable to others, you can actually see your own visual representation of your inner narrative as you create it. While the personal fable exists in your mind irrespective of Facebook, this technology that requires
a visual presentation of the self adds a new component to the fable, one that has
important consequences for adolescent development; in essence, Facebook creates a
public space for inner dialogue. An important component of this work is to match the
public presentation with their inner dialogue, and this is in large part what they are doing
in the creation phase work; they see a visual of the story and evaluate how well it
matches with their personal fable. Facebook allows them to visualize how successfully
they have done this.

The first step in this creation phase self dialogue is to determine whether the
Facebook performance matches with the story you have in your head. This is their
authenticity check, or to use my participants’ language, this is where they determine
whether they can “back it up online.” So in other words, a teen might fancy she is part of
a social group, but when she goes to present this on Facebook she will be forced to “back
it up” with actual images to document this social connection. For the most part this
works out well, and you can post the images that match your story; Chris, the participant
whose narrative was dominated by his athletic abilities in high status sports such as ice
hockey and lacrosse, was able to post a picture capturing him in his lacrosse uniform with
the caption “2 sports in the spring?” (Figure 60). This was an easy decision for him as
the image matches the story he has in his head about who he is, which serves to affirm
this version of the self. He knows this before he even posts it. For Chris, this image
becomes the “real me,” and when this is coupled with the positive feedback he received
from others in the form of 6 likes, which was high for a boy’s non-profile picture in the
study, and comments such as “kids a savage” from one of his male Facebook friends, the power this process has to foster confidence in the self is significant.

Figure 60

This works beautifully for cases like Chris’, where an existing image fills an important role in confirming the internal narrative. The question is what happens when the images that you have do not match up with highlights reel as you see it in your mind? In these cases, the image needed to convey the evolving story does not exist in advance of Facebook and therefore it must be created expressly for Facebook. Although the image is “manufactured” for Facebook, it is still an important part of the self dialogue process (i.e. what do you make of the mismatch between the images and the self story and also what you can/should do to reconcile the discrepancy). Yet there is also a danger that these images may be viewed as less organic and authentic.
While everyone creates images to some degree, there is a significant gender difference in how this plays out. In the interview Cassie’s self narrative invoked a dual feminine/tomboy image. Yet her visual self on Facebook is more focused on her athletic and tomboy side. As a result, Cassie goes out of her way to manufacture and post a few overwhelmingly feminine pictures and she has the most posed mirror selfies of anyone in the study. In Figure 61, Cassie (left) is posed in a stylized way to cultivate a feminine and sexualized image. She manufactures images like the one below in order to ensure the internal story she possesses of a tomboy/feminine self, is presented in Facebook.

Figure 61
Cassie seems ambivalent about this presentation, captioning the image “HAhahaha.. Im so weird,” indicating that she is not totally comfortable with the way she has reconciled
the internal narrative and Facebook presentation. Even though this picture is in stark contrast to the goofy or more athletic images that dominate Cassie’s Facebook, the gender rules that allow for photo shoots and glamorized selfies for girls mean that this is an acceptable image for her to have on Facebook. Although, it is interesting to note that the image only received two likes (one from the other girl in the picture), which is considered low for girls, perhaps suggesting that her peers are ambivalent about this presentation as well.

Another tactic Cassie uses is to post an image like the one below, which blends the tomboy and feminine together in an interesting way (Figure 62). In this image, she is wearing her basketball uniform while posing provocatively holding a lollipop.

![Image of Cassie wearing a basketball uniform and holding a lollipop](image)

*Figure 62*

The image illustrates the evolving self in this moment, as Cassie is clearly working through her story and deciding how to balance her feminine/tomboy persona. The image
feels awkward to me as an adult because of the odd adult/child juxtaposition, but for Cassie, this is probably an accurate depiction of her evolving self as she envisions it at this moment. Cassie captions this image “Posin in the bathroom….Casual.” The use of the word casual is interesting to me here, as it almost suggests this is her relaxed mirror selfie (as compared to her more stylized mirror selfie above).

While boys who do not have the images to back up their self story will also manufacture images, the gender rules do not allow them to do so as blatantly. They cannot take selfies or do photo shoots, and as a result they have to go to extensive lengths, such as photobombing pictures, or relying on girls to post images. As a result, the boys’ inner dialogic process is different. While girls like Cassie can create the image they want via friends or the mirror to take pictures, boys have to make the picture happen in a way that appears effortless. But this is dangerous for boys because of the importance they place on authenticity. They police each other to ensure accuracy and therefore they have to work very hard to ensure that it does not veer too far from their public image. There are obvious social consequences as they will be called out as posers by their peers, but also consequences for the inner dialogue. How can they internalize an inauthentic self? This is one reason why being authentic, even if it is an authenticity bounded by the rules of Facebook, is so important. They need to present something that they can truly recognize as the self. Because there is a genuine desire in them to really see themselves and explore who they are at this moment, which can be harder for them to do in face to face interactions. While so much can influence face to face interactions, the decision about what to capture and post, and assessing whether it reflects your inner self, are
processes that can be taken at an individual’s pace in the reflective creation phase. The evolving self can really be reflected upon in a way that can be so hard to do in face to face interactions.

**Self Judging the Fable**

Virtually every teen in the study reported engaging in this process of self assessment in the creation phase, and may explain why they were so self aware and reflective in the interviews; they analyzed the picture before it even made it to Facebook. The creation phase work is done before the image is posted to Facebook, and therefore not influenced at least initially, by peer feedback. Of course all of these teens were aware of their social position and peer judgments at all times, and I do not mean to suggest that they operated outside of social constraints or awareness; however, it is important to note that the work at this point is at least in some form, done alone. It is the moment they all described in the interviews where they look at the picture and make an assessment about the self before posting it. We all do this in any picture we take; we see an image and immediately judge our appearance, however I argue that the knowledge that this image will be representative of the self in a public discourse makes this much more powerful than simply doing a quick appearance assessment. The technology and the way my participants use it means that these images are more than just pictures; they are micro representations of the self. This has important implications both positive and negative for adolescent development generally and for the sociological understanding of the symbiotic relationship between adolescent development and technology use.
When adolescents like what they see in their images they affirm the self at that moment, which may positively influence self esteem. And while peer feedback can also enhance self esteem, my findings suggest that the internal feedback can be even more powerful in some cases. When I asked girls what likes, the universal Facebook symbol of peer approval, mean to them they describe them as showing that “people like you, people think you’re pretty or whatever.” But, as I mentioned in chapter four, because there are so many ways that likes can be interpreted, from the positive—liking the person, thinking they are attractive, liking the event, signaling you were there too—to the negative in the form of sarcastic likes, they are ambiguous. In other words, with likes you know you received some sort of feedback, but you are not always entirely sure what it means. I believe that all this leaves us with statements like “people think you’re pretty or whatever.” The meaning is there, but it gets discounted a bit along the way.

In contrast, when they see their own picture before they post it they know exactly what they like about it and these feelings are powerful. Cassie described the moment when she saw one of her pictures as “If you find one that’s really good, you’ll be like, “Oh wow I’m pretty… And like, Um, feel good about yourself.” She directly links seeing the flattering picture of herself she is curating for Facebook with how she feels about herself, and all of this is done before the image is even posted, it is in the work to get the presentation ready to share. The language “oh wow I’m pretty” is so much more powerful than “people think you’re pretty or whatever,” used to describe likes. And I do think this can extend to pictures that showcase the other important aspects of adolescence, such as friendships. I asked Sara about the picture below, one of her with a
good friend, which she was originally tagged in, but then chose to use as her profile picture (Figure 63).

She said that she “was expecting that it would show up on Facebook so I can see it and have my own copy because that’s a picture I wanted to see.” While this flattering picture signals friendship and attractiveness, Sara does not talk about wanting other people to see this image; instead she talks about how she hoped it would be on Facebook so that she could see it herself. When she sees the image she is able to engage in her own assessment feedback loop. And again, her language reflects the power and importance of seeing the image for herself, irrespective of Facebook.

Boys engage in a similar process of self affirmation, although they are, or at least suggest in the interviews, that they are less focused on affirming appearance and more interested in confirming their masculinity and social status in pictures. While several boys mentioned that they are happy to see a flattering picture of themselves, gendered
norms encouraged them to downplay this, as Tom did when he pointed out “well it’s one of five good pictures ever taken of me.” In contrast, they did not downplay how much they love great sports pictures of themselves and how good it makes them feel to see these images. Max spoke about how much cycling came to mean to him when he was transitioning to a new school, and as a result, it was a great boost to his self story to see pictures of himself “crushing” a century in less than three hours. Just seeing the image made him feel like he was part of such an elite group that he was “distancing [himself] from everyone except the people who get it.” Although he is comparing himself to the other in this example, it is in this “distancing,” where he is demonstrating status, that was so affirming for him during this uncertain period of school transition.

When Myles spoke about what he thinks of himself when he sees his pictures on Facebook he said that he sees himself as “an awkward teenager who does a lot of sports…has a good amount of friends.” The awkward comment was not said in a disparaging way; instead he seemed to see it as self-deprecating humor, again confirming the goofy idiot mentality. It is also indicative of the inner dialogue at work too; he makes sure to note that he is an athlete and has a “good amount of friends.” He ends his self assessment with “I guess dude can handle himself,” which highlights his self confidence. Interestingly Myles spoke about himself in the third person here, which could be an individual quirk or it could be a sign that he felt more comfortable revealing this rather personal self assessment by creating a bit of space between his thoughts and statement. He did not clarify what he meant by his ability to “handle himself,” but I think what he means is that in his images he sees himself doing everything he wants to highlight in his
Facebook presentation—he asserts masculinity via athletics, is socially connected, follows the Facebook rules, and makes a good presentation. And therefore he sees himself as someone who has things under control. In some ways Myles’ self assessment is about his executive functioning skills, likely reflecting norms of traditional masculinity. None of the girls spoke of self reflecting in this way at all, but many of the boys used their images and Facebook experiences as indications of their management skills, which appeared to be an esteem boost as well. This suggests that there may be a gendered difference in what gets highlighted for self assessment. Certainly my data illustrate that confirming masculinity and femininity is important for both peer and self assessment.

**Derailment of the Self and the Inner Dialogue**

The potential for positive effects of the self assessment process only happen when the presentation is authentic and ultimately when the presentation works. When individuals cannot present the narrative of the self that exists in one’s mind, the results can be devastating to one’s evolving sense of self. In chapters 4-6 I referenced how troubling it can be for teens like Jake when the peer feedback loop does not work out in the ways they hoped, and I think the same can be true for the self assessment process. Because my participants tended to be fairly effective in their Facebook presentations, I do not have substantial data to draw on here, but will highlight a few examples I did observe to illustrate the potentially negative consequences of the inner dialogue Facebook encourages.
Whenever participants were faced with an image, and this usually happened when they were tagged in images by others, that did not match the fable they reported unease or embarrassment. Charlie’s decision to quickly untag himself in any Irish step dancing pictures that appear is a good example of this. Yet, while Charlie was embarrassed initially, it did not have long term consequences for his sense of self as the small number of dancing pictures were not his entire presentation. The real danger comes when these images represent the majority of your Facebook. Jake had this problem and tried to navigate it by presenting an inauthentic self. Jake talked about himself as a popular kid and a great basketball player, yet he could not genuinely convey either of these on Facebook. His images did not show social connection because he had hardly any interaction on his images; he received very few likes (he had one profile picture with five likes, but the majority of his pictures had no likes) and no comments on any images and he had only one picture that showed him in a peer context. Additionally, while he had a few basketball pictures, they were mostly off court or simply holding a basketball, like the profile picture below (Figure 64), neither of which are representative of the typical athletic images other participants captured.
This discrepancy leaves Jake stuck. He either has to change his current fable to reflect the images he does have, or he has to stick with his narrative and present a highly edited version of the self. Because I believe Jake is so wedded to his fable he chose to do the later, and his Facebook presentation represents an inauthentic version of the self, one that is more than just a highlights reel. Although this was evident subtly in his current Facebook presentation, apparently his foray into Facebook in 9th grade went further and he was bullied to such an extent that he was forced to shut down his Facebook. Jake was not overly forthcoming about this time in the interview, but I was able to piece together his story because another boy utilized him as an example of a bullying experience he witnessed. Nonetheless, the time and energy Jake spent trying to deal with the bullying in 9th grade was evident when he said “And then like, I don’t know it was just, um, yeah it was just really time consuming…And I don’t know I just, I kinda was like, I don’t think I can control myself, so if I just like, kyboshed it, it’s easier than trying to monitor it every day.” I think his description of trying to control himself is an interesting one as it
makes it clear how much effort he put into trying to stop the bullying. Jake was not clueless or deserving of the bullying, but in spite of his efforts he could not make it stop. I also think, given the ubiquitous use of Facebook amongst his peers at that time, it showed an incredible amount of self control to remove himself from Facebook. It took him four years to return to Facebook, and although his presentation still is not authentic, it is a tentative and measured return, one almost completely devoid of any feel of the “real me.” He rarely posts and when he does his postings are often inspirational quotes such as “a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor,” that cannot be misinterpreted or used against him. While these posts are beyond the scope of this research, I would argue that his choice of quotation is inherently meaningful given his past experiences on Facebook.

What is interesting about Jake’s current Facebook presentation is that overall it is a fairly generic presentation with a few meaningful images or quotes sprinkled in at times. While other participants are boldly working to present themselves and engage in the self assessment work, Jake’s process has been derailed by his previous Facebook experiences. He cannot really do the self analysis work I described in the previous section because he is not fully engaged in his Facebook presentation. Yet how could anyone expect him to assert “this is me now” on Facebook given his past experiences? This certainly had implications for his sense of self in 9th grade when the bullying got so bad he felt that it was better to “kybosh” Facebook than keep it going, however I wonder what the implications are for his current Facebook incarnation. If the self assessment process can lead to benefits such as building confidence and executive functioning skills, then it is important to note that teens who cannot do this not only suffer the negative
effects of peer policing, but are also not able to obtain the benefits of the inner dialogic work afforded to their peers.

Jake’s narrative pales in comparison to some of the horrible stories of social media related suicides, depression, and bullying in teens. But Jake is an interesting example of an adolescent attempting a Facebook redo. He is tentative in his current presentation and I wonder about the effect of this on his evolving sense of self. If I argue that the visible peer and personal feedback loops of Facebook can build confidence, which can affirm the evolving self, than what happens to Jake, who is not buttressed by the confidence that the feedback loops can provide? The data cannot address this question given that Jake was the only example of this in the study, but it is enough to suggest that the consequence of this self regulation is a derailment of the evolving self.

Implications for Future Research

Because work in the field is nascent I believe there is tremendous opportunity for future research. First, I think it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study in which the same methods are used to follow a cohort from early adolescence (age 13/14) to early adulthood (21) to see how the inner dialogue may (or may not) evolve on Facebook. My research illuminates a few experiences of early adolescence, and the literature in the field focuses on college students, but no one has followed the same cohort throughout adolescence into early adulthood in order to see how the visual fable gets presented and feedback is interpreted. Another obvious avenue for future research would be to recruit more racially and economically diverse participants to see if my findings hold for non-white, middle class adolescents and how hierarchies shift with
intersectional differences. Additionally, it would be interesting to study the long-term psychosocial consequences of Facebook bullying on the development of the self. I have presented Jake’s story here, but I currently have no sense of how representative his experience is or what the long term effects may be. Finally, I spoke about how important the rule following is for creating a successful Facebook presentation, and as such, I think it would be interesting to apply these methods and research questions to adolescents on the Autism Spectrum, who may have a harder time understanding and implementing the rules. I see tremendous opportunities for social media use with adolescents on the Autism Spectrum as the technology removes face to face communication; however, there is obviously the risk of significant negative feedback from peers. I believe all of these research projects are viable and would be interesting to pursue in the future.

**Study Limitations**

This work is limited first and foremost by the fact that it is a small in-depth sample, and therefore cannot be generalized to describe the adolescent experience as a whole. Participants were largely white, middle class youths from the Boston area, and there is no way to know if their stories, images, and internalization processes are representative of American youth more generally. My hypothesis based on some differences I did note between the private school and city kids is that the images and rules may change, but the processes, particularly the self work in the creation phase, will not. But, mine is an emerging theory that needs to be more broadly applied to account for differences by race, class, and the young adolescent male experiences. Secondly my study is the first in depth work in the field on the young adolescent population, and as
such, it is challenging to situate their experiences in the larger sociological and social media literature on college students. Thus, while my data suggests that the college experience cannot be used to represent the collective adolescent experience, I cannot really offer a direct critique to any of these findings.

Conclusions: Launching the Evolving Self

The Facebook presentation of self easily conjures so many sociological frameworks, it feels almost redundant at times. Goffman’s (1959) impression management and front stage performance as well as Cooley’s (1964) looking glass self are natural fits and have been used by many sociologists and social psychologists to explain the Facebook phenomenon (Tufekci 2008; Robinson 2007; Walther 2008; Papacharissi 2009; boyd 2007; Hogan 2010; Zarghooni 2007). Similarly, the data on gender suggests that Facebook does nothing more than simply replicate, and some may argue even heighten, traditional gender scripts. Therefore, I think the real critique is whether Facebook simply replicates the offline world albeit in a visual format. Even with this new technology, is nothing really new?

And in many ways, I think this is fair critique. Adolescents come to Facebook with the friends they already have, they pretty much know the impression they will make with their images, and how they will be received in the form of likes and comments. They know all this because Facebook is not some online experience disconnected from their lives. Yet, as I began this chapter saying that thinking of Facebook and social media as two completely independent contexts is an oversimplification, my findings have led me to believe that it is also incomplete to think of it as the same context enacted online.
and offline. I think there is something unique in this social media context that
differentially impacts youth development, an important implication of my research for the
field. Fundamentally the technology gives teens the chance to curate a visual
presentation through reflection upon their personal fable. In a time of great transition and
development, they are now tasked with presenting it visually for everyone, their peers
and themselves, to see. This is no small task. It requires them to manage all the
traditional work of adolescence in the offline (learn social rules, develop a self story, etc)
and also create or find images to support the story and emphasize the highlights that you
want to see on Facebook. All of this must be bounded within the Facebook rules that they
learn and then replicated within the context of their authentic self presentation. And in
the end, they have to look at the visual representation of self that they have created and
contend with feedback from their Facebook friends and their own self assessment. When
listed like this, it is actually an incredible amount of self development work that they
must do on Facebook. I think this work, which is often dismissed because we just cannot
see the work they do in the creation phase or any value in bikini pictures, has a powerful
effect on self development. And for the most part, it is not as detrimental as the popular
press would lead us to believe.

Fundamentally I believe the chance to see a representation of your inner self
narrative on Facebook, to literally try to put together the story in your mind in a visual
highlight reel form, is deeply meaningful for adolescents. When done well (i.e. an
authentic presentation that conforms to the Facebook rules) it can foster a powerful self
confidence. It is there in the “wow I am pretty” moments that I do not think happen for
adolescent girls too often offline. This is because while technology has generally sped up every aspect of our society, adolescents can actually use Facebook to slow down and reflect on their evolving self. In this way, it is actually very considered and controlled. Facebook’s technology and the ways in which they have co-opted it, give them the time to reflect on the self in a way that is hard to do in the moment in face to face interactions. This work contributes to the field by defining the creation phase and illustrating the important work that happens there. To date, none of the research in the field has emphasized the Facebook process prior to posting. This period of the process is essential for understanding both the motivation and meanings adolescents make of their Facebook work.

I came to this understanding through the image analysis and an analysis of the follow up interview data. My methodology allowed me to talk to them about specific pictures and to hear them explain what the pictures meant to them and really how much of the work of self-affirmation was done before the image was even posted to Facebook; it was in seeing the image and engaging with it as part of the evolving self. In this way, likes and bikini pictures are only one part, the front stage part, of the Facebook story. My work makes the claim that the earlier back stage work is as important for self development.

This is fundamentally a multidisciplinary study. While it is grounded in the sociological theories of gender and symbolic interactionism, it also considers the ways in which micro interactions and moments of self reflection can work to constitute the self over time. My research offers media studies a new framework of the two phased
Facebook process, from which to consider the deeper meanings that adolescents make and take from social media. The creation phase work also offers an example of a controlled and thoughtful decision-making process that challenges some of the new brain development research suggesting adolescents really struggle with making good choices. And finally this work addresses a significant gap in considering the role Facebook plays in altering the process of adolescent development. Although Facebook may lose popularity as adolescents move on the next cool site, social media and more specifically for this research, the online visual presentation of the self, is now a part of our society. Adolescents and social media technology are working together to constitute a new path to adolescent development. In many ways this new path has the potential to build self confidence that can affirm the evolving self and have long-term positive implications for these adolescents. We have only begun to see the effects of this new symbiotic relationship between adolescents and social media technology. And hopefully if we can continue to get past our adult judgments of the bikini pictures and bullying, we can continue to engage adolescents in genuine conversations about their experiences and the meanings they are making about the self on social media, an important practical implication of this research. My sociological theory of adolescent development and social media suggests that this relationship is neither a brave new world nor is it a rehash of the same old thing in a different medium. Adolescents are forging a new path to development, and most impressively they are taking control of the technology to do so in a way that can have potentially positive implications for their self development.
APPENDIX A: FLYER TO POST TARGETING ADOLESCENTS

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR A STUDY
Adolescents’ Presentation of the Facebook Self

Have you heard all the ways in which adults try to explain what you are doing on Facebook? Now is your chance to tell researchers what you really think about Facebook and your generation’s use of social media! This research is looking to understand how teens use Facebook and what it means to them.

Participation in this study requires 2 in person meetings and 2.5 total hours of your time. You must be in 9th-12th grade and have a Facebook account to participate in this study.

You will be paid $25 for participating in this study!!!

To find out more about this study please contact Jill Walsh at jillw@bu.edu. This research is conducted under the direction of the Department of Sociology at Boston University.
Subject: Participants Wanted for Research Study on Adolescent Facebook Use

Hello GardenMoms,

Do you know high schoolers who spend all day online? Do you wonder what they do on Facebook and why it matters to them? My research seeks to examine these questions and more. I am a fellow Boston area mom and am working on my PhD dissertation in Sociology at Boston University on adolescent Facebook usage, entitled: Adolescents’ Presentation of the Facebook Self. I am writing to appeal to moms of teens or moms who know teens who might be interested in participating in my study. I am currently looking to interview teens in 9th-12th grade from the Boston area about their experiences and understandings of Facebook.

Participation in this study requires 2 in person meetings with me and a total of 2.5 hours of the teen’s time.

Although there is a lot of research out there about teens’ use of social media, very few of these studies have actually talked to high school students directly. I hope to present their perspective in my research. It is my hope that this study will give your teen a chance to think through his/her social media usage and raise awareness about both the potential positives and negatives of its use.

To find out more about this study please contact Jill Walsh at jillw@bu.edu. This research is conducted under the direction of the Department of Sociology at Boston University.
APPENDIX C: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM: PARENTS

Title of Project: Adolescents’ Projection of the Facebook Self: Status by Accumulation on Facebook

Principal Investigator: Jill Walsh

Study Background and Purpose
I am a graduate student at Boston University and am asking you for permission for your child to participate in a study that will be used toward my dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to understand whether and how the work that adolescents do on Facebook influences their social status and behaviors offline. Information on Facebook and the role it plays in teens’ lives will be collected from high school students in the Boston area. By allowing your child to participate in this study you can help researchers to understand Facebook’s influence on their lives. Allowing your child to participate is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will be given a copy of this form.

Study Procedures
We want to learn as much as possible about your child’s use of Facebook. If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we will ask your child to first participate in a focus group. At the focus group your child will be a part of a conversation with the researchers and other adolescents about their general thoughts about adolescent Facebook usage. At the beginning of the focus group each teen will be asked to complete a short survey about their behaviors and internet usage. This first meeting will take place at a mutually convenient location and last approximately 90 minutes.

After the focus group the researcher will friend each participant on Facebook. The researcher will then follow the Facebook visual postings and comments they generate from their Facebook friends. All images posted during this two week timeframe may be subject to analysis, including those depicting any health related behaviors such as exercise, drinking, and smoking. Your child will have no direct involvement with the researcher during this phase. At the end of the two weeks your child will participate in an open ended interview with the researcher. Your child will be asked questions about the photographs posted as well as your child’s feelings about the responses he or she receives from Facebook friends. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and take place at a mutually convenient coffee shop or library. The focus groups and interviews will be audio-recorded.

At the follow up interview your child will be paid $25 for participating in this study. A pizza dinner will be provided at the focus groups.
Potential Risks to Participation
This study is of low risk to the teens participating in the study. While the researcher will work hard to protect your child’s privacy in all phases of the study, confidentiality in the focus group cannot be completely guaranteed as it is possible that participants may share information with others after the focus group. The researcher will tell focus group participants not to share the information we discuss with others at the beginning and end of the meeting; however, it is not possible for the researcher to ensure that this will take place. Additionally, being interviewed can make people upset or embarrassed. The interviewer is trained to help if your child feels uncomfortable during the interview. If your child wants more help, the researcher will be in touch with you and help connect you to people who can help.

Potential Benefits to Participation
Participants will receive no direct benefit from their participation; however, it is also the researcher’s hope that your child leaves this study with a better understanding of his or her use of online social media and some of the motivations underlying this use. The main benefit of this research is for society. Learning more about what Facebook means to adolescents and how it influences behaviors from their perspective will provide parents, researchers, and teens with an understanding of how it influences their lives and hopefully help us improve adolescents’ experiences with social media both online and offline.

Confidentiality
The researcher is committed to protecting your child’s privacy. A code number will be used in place of your child’s name on any written materials and your child’s name or identity will not be used in any report resulting from this work. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

The researcher and the Boston University Institutional Review Board may access the data. Information from this study and study records may be reviewed and photocopied by the institution and by regulators responsible for research oversight such as the Office of Human Research Protections, and the Boston University Institutional Review Board. The IRB reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects. During the study the data will be stored in the researcher’s home office. Only the principal investigator will have access to the survey data and audio-recordings. All materials will be destroyed at the end of the study. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no identifiable information will be used. Only with your permission may the images from your child’s Facebook page be used for professional purposes. This might include using them in a presentation to other researchers or in a published article or book. The picture will not have your child’s name on it and all potential identifiers will be removed from the photograph. If during the course of the study the researcher sees information posted on your child’s Facebook that
could result in physical or psychological harm to him or her, the researcher will report this information to you.

**Alternatives**
Does your child have to be in this study? Absolutely not. No one will make you or your child participate if you don’t want to do this. The alternative is to not participate in this study.

**Participation and Withdrawal**
Your participation is voluntary. Your child may choose not to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

**Investigator’s Contact Information**
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Jill Walsh at (617) 679-1627. My email is jillw@bu.edu. You may also speak with my advisor, Pat Rieker, PhD, with questions. Her contact information is: rieker@bu.edu, (617) 358-0640.

**IRB Contact Information**
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant you may contact the IRB directly at the information provided below. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Boston University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

☐ I agree to allow my child to be audio-recorded  
☐ I do not want my child to be audio-recorded  
☐ I agree to allow my child’s Facebook images to be used for professional purposes.  
☐ I do not want my child’s Facebook images to be used for professional purposes.

__________________________________
Name of Parent/Legal Guardian

_______________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian Date
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

______________________________
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

______________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent                Date
APPENDIX D: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM-(SUBJECTS 18+)

Title of Project: Adolescents’ Projection of the Facebook Self: Status by Accumulation on Facebook

Principal Investigator: Jill Walsh

Study Background and Purpose
I am a graduate student at Boston University and would like you to participate in study that will be used for my dissertation research to learn more about the ways that teenagers use Facebook. I want to find out why teenagers use Facebook and how they feel about the comments they get. After I tell you about it, I will ask if you'd like to be in this study or not.

What Happens in this Research Study
If you agree to be in the study, three things will happen. First, you will participate in one focus group, which will give you a chance for you to talk to the researcher with some other teenagers about Facebook. During the focus group you and the other teen participants will take part in a general discussion about Facebook usage and its influence. You may talk to each other and share any information that you would like with the group; however, the researcher’s questions will be fairly general at this point and will not ask you any personal information about your beliefs or behaviors. At the focus group you will be asked to fill out a short anonymous survey about your online and offline behaviors. The survey and focus group together are designed to take 90 minutes of your time. After that, you will be asked to friend the researcher on Facebook. The researcher will then look at your wall postings for a two week period. All of the images you post during this time may be subject to analysis, including those depicting any health related behaviors like exercise, drinking, and smoking. At the end of the two weeks, the researcher will defriend you and not look at your page again. At that point you the researcher will meet with you to talk about the pictures posted and comments your images receive during the two week period.

The survey and interviews will be given by the researcher. The interview is designed to take 1 hour and will take place at a convenient location like a local coffee shop. The focus group and interviews will be audio-recorded.

Dinner will be provided at the focus group. The only cost to you for this research is your time. You will be paid $25 at the follow up interview for your participation in this study. In all, you will spend 2.5 hours participating in this study.

Privacy and Protection
Your privacy is very important and your name will never be used on the study materials. A code number will be used instead. Privacy settings on Facebook will be used so that other participants in the research study cannot see your Facebook page. During the study
all files (audio recordings of focus groups and interviews, interviewer’s notes, and any print outs of images) will be kept on a password protected computer file and/or in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher and the Institutional Review Board staff will have access to the files. After the study is completed all audio recordings will be deleted. Ask the researcher about this if you have any questions.

If during the course of the study the researcher sees information posted on Facebook that could result in physical or psychological harm to you, the researcher will be required to report this information to you.

**Risks to Participation**
While the researcher will work hard to protect your privacy in all phases of the study, confidentiality in the focus group cannot be completely guaranteed as it is possible that participants will share information from our conversation with others after the meeting. The researcher will tell focus group participants not to share the information we discuss with others at the beginning and end of the meeting; however, it is not possible to ensure that this will take place. Additionally, an interview can sometimes make people feel upset or embarrassed. If that happens, the interviewer can help you and you can always choose not to answer the question.

**Benefits to Participation**
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. This research will provide you with the opportunity to tell us how you use Facebook and what it means to you. Your participation in this study will give you the chance to share your perspective and potentially allow you to think through your use of online social media. Your participation in this study will also benefit society as it will help adults better understand the role that Facebook plays in your life, both the potential positives and negatives. The researcher’s goal is ultimately to help adults understand the role that social media plays in your offline life, which is not entirely clear to adults who see your online and offline worlds as separate. Your insight hopefully can help younger teens navigate this new online/offline social reality that you face.

**Voluntary Participation**
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you sign this consent form it means that you have read it or it has been read to you. It also means that you have been given the chance to ask questions about the study and your questions have been answered. If you sign this it means that you are agreeing to participate.

**Alternatives**
Do you have to be in this study? No, you don’t. No one will make you if you don’t want to do this. You can also choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Just tell the researchers if you decide not to do it. No one will be mad at you if you don’t want to participate. If you decide to join and then later change your mind it is ok.
☐ I agree to be audio-recorded
☐ I do not want to be audio-recorded
☐ I agree to allow my Facebook pictures to be used for professional purposes
☐ I do not want my Facebook pictures to be used for professional purposes

Contact Information
If you have questions regarding this research or if you think you are being hurt by the research now or later you or your parents can contact the researcher, Jill Walsh at (617) 679-1627 or jillw@bu.edu. You may also contact her advisor at Boston University, Pat Riker at (617) 358-0640 or rieker@bu.edu or the Institutional Review Board at Boston University, which oversees this research at (617) 358-6115 or irb@bu.edu. The researchers will give you a copy of the consent form if you wish.

__________________________________________
Name of Subject

________________________                   ________________
Signature of Subject               Date

________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent

________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent               Date
Title of Project: Adolescents’ Projection of the Facebook Self: Status by Accumulation on Facebook

Principal Investigator: Jill Walsh

Study Background and Purpose
I am a graduate student at Boston University and would like you to participate in study that will be used for my dissertation research to learn more about the ways that teenagers use Facebook. I want to find out why teenagers use Facebook and how they feel about the comments they get. After I tell you about it, I will ask if you'd like to be in this study or not.

What Happens in this Research Study
If you agree to be in the study, three things will happen. First, you will participate in one focus group, which will give you a chance for you to talk to the researcher with some other teenagers about Facebook. During the focus group you and the other teen participants will take part in a general discussion about Facebook usage and its influence. You may talk to each other and share any information that you would like with the group; however, the researcher’s questions will be fairly general at this point and will not ask you any personal information about your beliefs or behaviors. At the focus group you will be asked to fill out a short anonymous survey about your online and offline behaviors. The survey and focus group together are designed to take 90 minutes of your time. After that, you will be asked to friend the researcher on Facebook. The researcher will then look at your wall postings for a two week period. All of the images you post during this time may be subject to analysis, including those depicting any health related behaviors like exercise, drinking, and smoking. At the end of the two weeks, the researcher will defriend you and not look at your page again. At that point you the researcher will meet with you to talk about the pictures posted and comments your images receive during the two week period.

The survey and interviews will be given by the researcher. The interview is designed to take 1 hour and will take place at a convenient location like a local coffee shop. The focus group and interviews will be audio-recorded.

Dinner will be provided at the focus group. The only cost to you for this research is your time. You will be paid $25 for participating in this study. The $25 will be given at the time of the follow up interview. In all, you will spend 2.5 hours participating in this study.

Privacy and Protection
Your privacy is very important and your name will never be used on the study materials. A code number will be used instead. Privacy settings on Facebook will be used so that
other participants in the research study cannot see your Facebook page. During the study all files (audio recordings of focus groups and interviews, interviewer’s notes, and any print outs of images) will be kept on a password protected computer file and/or in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher and the Institutional Review Board staff will have access to the files. After the study is completed all audio recordings will be deleted. Ask the researcher about this if you have any questions. If during the course of the study the researcher sees information posted on Facebook that could result in physical or psychological harm to you, the researcher will be required to report this information to you and/or your parent or guardian.

**Risks to Participation**
While the researcher will work hard to protect your privacy in all phases of the study, confidentiality in the focus group cannot be completely guaranteed as it is possible other participants will talk about our conversation after the meeting. The researcher will tell focus group participants not to share the information we discuss with others at the beginning and end of the meeting; however, it is not possible to ensure that this will take place. Additionally, an interview can sometimes make people feel upset or embarrassed. If that happens, the interviewer can help you and you can always choose not to answer the question.

**Benefits to Participation**
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. This research will provide you with the opportunity to tell us how you use Facebook and what it means to you. Your participation in this study will give you the chance to share your perspective and potentially allow you to think through your use of online social media. Your participation in this study will also benefit society as it will help adults better understand the role that Facebook plays in your life, both the potential positives and negatives. The researcher’s goal is ultimately to help adults understand the role that social media plays in your offline life, which is not entirely clear to adults who see your online and offline worlds as separate. Your insight hopefully can help younger teens navigate this new online/offline social reality that you face.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your legal guardian must say it is ok for you to participate in this study. He or she has to sign a form like this in order for you to take part.

If you sign this assent form it means that you have read it or it has been read to you. It also means that you have been given the chance to ask questions about the study and your questions have been answered. If you sign this it means that you are agreeing to participate.

**Alternatives**
Do you have to be in this study? No, you don’t. No one will make you if you don’t want to do this. You can also choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any
time. Just tell the researchers if you decide not to do it. No one will be mad at you if you
don’t want to participate. If you decide to join and then later change your mind it is ok.

☐ I agree to be audio-recorded
☐ I do not want to be audio-recorded
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Contact Information
If you have questions regarding this research or if you think you are being hurt by the
research now or later you or your parents can contact the researcher, Jill Walsh at (617)
679-1627 or jillw@bu.edu. You may also contact her advisor at Boston University, Pat
Riker at (617) 358-0640 or rieker@bu.edu or the Institutional Review Board at Boston
University, which oversees this research at (617) 358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.
The researchers will give you a copy of the consent form if you wish.

_____________________________________________________
Name of Subject

_____________________________________________________
Signature of Subject Date
The purpose of my research is to find out what you really think about the role it plays and whether it affects your thinking and actions. In so many of the studies researchers just assume that Facebook means the same thing to you as it does to them or they just interview college students to stand in for adolescents. My goal is to represent your voices and opinions and find out what teenagers really think about Facebook, how you use it, and how it affects you. The information you give will be used only for the development of my dissertation survey and will not be shared with anyone nor will the responses ever be attached to your name.

DO NOT write your name on this survey. The answers you give will be kept confidential. No one will know what you write. Completing the survey is voluntary. If you are not comfortable answering a question, just leave it blank.

Please answer the questions based on what you really do. The questions that ask about your background will be used only to describe the types of students completing this survey.

Please feel free to ask if you have any questions about the survey questions or the use of the information. You can ask me in person or send an email to jillw@bu.edu if you would prefer. Thank you in advance.

1. How old are you? (Circle one answer)
   A. 12 years old or younger
   B. 13 years old
   C. 14 years old
   D. 15 years old
   E. 16 years old
   F. 17 years old
   G. 18 years old or older

2. What is your sex?
   A. Female
   B. Male

3. In what grade are you?
   A. 9th grade
   B. 10th grade
   C. 11th grade
   D. 12th grade
4. How would you describe your race? (Select one or more responses.)
   A. American Indian or Alaska Native
   B. Asian
   C. Black or African American
   D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   E. White
   F. _____________________________

The following questions ask about internet use. For the purposes of these questions you should count only internet usage that is **not related to school work**.

5. How often do you go online (not including academic reasons)?
   A. More than 5 times per day
   B. 2-4 times per day
   C. Once a day
   D. Almost every day
   E. Several times per week
   F. Hardly ever

6. As far as you know, have your parents installed a filter on your computer that limits the type of websites you can visit?
   A. Yes
   B. No

7. Do you ever go online to look for health information (things like physical activity suggestions, specific health concerns, etc)?
   A. Yes
   B. No

8. Do you go online to research current events?
   A. Yes
   B. No

9. Do you go online to search for cultural information (music, movies, etc)?
   A. Yes
   B. No

10. Do you go into online chat rooms?
    A. Yes
    B. No

11. Do you have a Facebook page?
    A. Yes
    B. No
If no, why not?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

If you do not have a Facebook page, please skip to Question #18

If yes, 11a. How often do you go on Facebook?
A. 3 or more times a day
B. 2 times a day
C. Once a day
D. Several times/week
E. Once a week
F. Rarely

12. How important is Facebook for your social life?
A. Extremely important
B. Very Important
C. Important
D. Somewhat important
E. Not at all important

13. Have you ever uploaded pictures to Facebook?
A. Yes
B. No (if no, skip to question 14)

13a: If yes, are pictures an important part of your Facebook page?
A. Extremely important
B. Very Important
C. Important
D. Somewhat important
E. Not at all important

13b. Do you restrict who has access to these pictures?
A. All the time
B. Most of the time
C. Some times
D. Never
14. How much of the information or photos posted on your Facebook page are misleading or exaggerated?
   A. All
   B. Some
   C. Very little
   D. None

15. Are any of your Facebook friends people you have never met in person?
   A. Yes
   B. No

16. Do you think it is fun to go on Facebook?
   A. Yes
   B. No

   If yes, what is fun about it?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

17. Can Facebook be stressful?
   A. Yes
   B. No

   If yes, in what ways?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

18. Would you say that your technology (computers, cell phones, etc) makes your life more or less stressful?
   A. More stressful
19. Thinking about the different ways you can socialize or communicate with friends how often do you . . .

A. Spend time with friends in person? (Circle one response)
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

B. Talk to friends on the phone (cell or landline)?
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

C. Text with friends?
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

D. Email friends
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

E. Send messages through Facebook
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

F. Post on a friend’s Facebook wall
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

G. Comment on a friend’s Facebook status
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

H. Comment on a friend’s Facebook pictures
   - Everyday
   - Several times/week
   - At least once/week
   - Never

20. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe (physically or emotionally) at school or on your way to or from school?
   - 0 days
   - 1 day
   - 2 or 3 days
   - 4 or 5 days
   - 6 or more days

21. During the past 12 months, has anyone been mean to you online? (This includes mean comments on e-mail, IM, chat rooms, social networking sites, Web sites, or by text.)
   - A. Yes
   - B. No
22. Have you ever tried cigarette smoking, even one or two puffs?  
A. Yes  
B. No (skip to #24)  

If yes:  
22a. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you smoke cigarettes?  
A. 0 days  
B. 1 or 2 days  
C. 3 to 5 days  
D. 6 to 9 days  
E. 10 to 19 days  
F. 20 to 29 days  
G. All 30 days  

22b. Approximately how many cigarettes do you smoke a week?  
A. Less than a pack a week  
B. More than 2 packs a week  

23. How many times have you had at least one drink of alcohol in the last 6 months?  
A. 0 times  
B. 1 or 2 times  
C. More than 10 times  
D. More than 50 times  
E. 100 or more times  

24. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have at least one drink of alcohol?  
A. 0 days  
B. 1 or 2 days  
C. 3 to 5 days  
D. 6 to 9 days  
E. 10 to 19 days  
F. 20 to 29 days  
G. All 30 days  

25. How do you describe your weight?  
A. Very underweight  
B. Slightly underweight  
C. About the right weight  
D. Slightly overweight  
E. Very overweight
26. Which of the following are you trying to do about your weight?
   A. Lose weight
   B. Gain weight
   C. Stay the same weight
   D. I am not trying to do anything about my weight

27. During the past 7 days, on how many days were you physically active for a total of at least 60 minutes per day? (Add up all the time you spent in any kind of physical activity that increased your heart rate and made you breathe hard some of the time.)
   A. 0 days
   B. 1-2 days
   C. 3-4 days
   D. 5-6 days
   E. 7 days

28. On an average school day, how many hours do you watch TV?
   A. I do not watch TV on an average school day
   B. Less than 1 hour per day
   C. 1 hour per day
   D. 2 hours per day
   E. 3 hours per day
   F. 4 hours per day
   G. 5 or more hours per day

29. On an average school day, how many hours do you play video or computer games or use a computer for something that is not school work? (Include activities such as Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo DS, iPod touch, Facebook, and the Internet.)
   A. I do not play video or computer games or use a computer for something that is not school work
   B. Less than 1 hour per day
   C. 1 hour per day
   D. 2 hours per day
   E. 3 hours per day
   F. 4 hours per day
   G. 5 or more hours per day

30. During the past 12 months, on how many sports teams did you play? (Count any teams run by your school or community groups.)
   A. 0 teams
   B. 1 team
   C. 2 teams
   D. 3 or more teams
31. During the past 12 months, did you talk to a teacher or other adult in your school about a personal problem you had?
   A. Yes
   B. No

   This is the end of the survey.
   Thank you very much for your help.
APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

1) Amount of time on Facebook
   a. Compared to peers
   b. Why so much/so little
   c. Is it a need, want, etc?

2) How is their time spent on Facebook
   a. Reading every post, only some and why
   b. Decision making process about what to comment on.
      i. Pictures vs. text
      ii. Person posting
   c. Feelings about this.

3) How realistic are their Facebook profiles (pictures, likes, info, etc).
   a. Decision making process about what comments to write
      i. Point/goal of the posts
      ii. Types of responses you receive
      iii. From whom
      iv. Feelings about this.
   b. Decision making process about what pictures to post
      i. Point/goal
      ii. Types of responses you receive
      iii. From whom
      iv. Feelings about this.

4) The notion of you “give to get” on Facebook
   a. Kula ring (certain people more than others?)

5) Anxiety about posts/comments.
   a. Judgment from peers
   b. Whose opinions matters

6) Do you look to others’ pages to get a sense of what to post?
   a. Impact on activities
   b. Impact on behaviors
   c. Impact on relationships

7) Engagement in activities in order to have the pictures to post
a. Heard of people doing this
b. Protective behaviors
c. Risk behaviors
APPENDIX H: FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Evaluation of others pictures (girls only):

1. What do you think when you see this?
2. What story is she telling/why is this picture there?
3. What would you think of this person? No holes barred.
4. Different if she posts it or tagged in it?
5. Read comments for judgment or just go with the picture?

Questions about social status/status conferred through Facebook:

6. Tell me about the friend groups at your school
7. Can you see the social hierarchies on Facebook? How might X and Y groups have different Facebooks? Any ways the same?
8. Do you ever see people trying to get in with a certain group on Facebook?
   a. Reaction? Shot down, accepted, etc.
   b. Can you try things out on Facebook or is it more scary than face to face?
9. Have you? Can you give me an example?
10. Example of a time when someone was hurt on Facebook (you or friend).
    a. What are the feelings-exclusion, anger, sad, etc

Gender Questions

11. What are typical postings for girls you know?
    a. You are so prettys
    b. Glam shot
    c. Group shots
12. Are there things you feel like you need to have on your page as a girl?
13. Typical for boys
    a. Sports
    b. Girls
    c. Jackass
14. Are there things you feel like you need to have on your page as boys?
15. What message are you trying to send to someone might be interested in with your page?
    a. How do you want a new romantic interest to see you (fun, flirty, ditzy, athletic, etc)
b. Do people flirt on Facebook? Can you see it in others?

Decision-making process of own posting:

16. What is the story behind this picture?
   a. When taken, who is in it/relationships, experience documented, etc?
17. Did you think about posting the picture on Facebook while you were taking the picture?
18. How soon after it was taken did you post it?
19. Why did you choose to post it?
20. Who commented on it?
   a. Relationships/closeness/expected?
   b. Any surprises?
   c. How often do you post on their pages?
21. What do you think of the feedback you received?
   a. How interpret the comments
22. Does this feedback affect what you might post in the future:
   a. Would you post it again
   b. More like this/different from this and why
23. Do you have other pictures like it?
   a. What does this picture help to show others about you?
      i. What performance want to signal
   b. References to gender performance if applicable in picture

Editing of photos:

24. How likely are you to edit your picture after it has been posted?
   a. How likely are you to edit your comments after they have been posted?
   b. Would you ever remove a comment/post you received?
      i. In what circumstances?
      ii. What are the ramifications if any?
25. Would you ever ask a friend to comment on a picture?
   a. In what circumstances?
APPENDIX I: IMAGE CODEBOOK

Theme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posing</td>
<td>The Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity/Event</td>
<td>Sports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tone:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playful/Funny</td>
<td>Flattering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexy/Flirtatious</td>
<td>Youthful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signaling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Composition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cropped</td>
<td>Centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are focus/aware of picture being taken</td>
<td>Doctored (Instagram, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 People Same Sex</td>
<td>Group of People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 People Mixed Sex</td>
<td>Consumerism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationship Closeness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Closeness</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Touching</td>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space Between</td>
<td>Distant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No likes</td>
<td>1-10 likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20 likes</td>
<td>21-30 likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50 likes</td>
<td>51-100 likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100+ likes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIX J: INTERVIEW CODEBOOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FBStress</td>
<td>Participant reports that FB is stressful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBNoStress</td>
<td>Facebook is described as not stressful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LikesStrategies</td>
<td>Strategies they describe using to increase their likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MeaningLikes</td>
<td>Description of what likes mean to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GenderScriptsGeneral</td>
<td>Language that reveals the gender scripts at play on Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GeneralImpressionManage</td>
<td>This is just generally how they manage impressions/decisions about what to post, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProPicImpressionManage</td>
<td>How they describe the meaning of the profile picture and the role it plays in establishing their personal fable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBStatus</td>
<td>General comments/ideas about status on FB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Fable</td>
<td>The participant makes some reference to his/her personal fable. May be very subtle, but some indication of how the image contributes to their story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RulesGeneral</td>
<td>The rules that are used to guide Facebook actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RulesGirls</td>
<td>Rules that girls must follow on Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RulesBoys</td>
<td>Rules that boys must follow on Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RuleViolation</td>
<td>Examples/talk about someone who violates the Facebook rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Emphasis on appearance, wanting to look pretty, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PartyPics</td>
<td>Discussion on party pictures: what they mean, why they are important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signaling</td>
<td>Image/comment signals a certain type of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SocialLearning</td>
<td>Language that indicates social learning, trial and error, reevaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ImageDescription</td>
<td>Discussion of their visual images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Judgements they make about others’ images, what others post on Facebook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>Emphasis on the authentic self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FriendsInfluence</td>
<td>The role that friends play in determining their Facebook interactions. May include helping with picture taking, profile picture selection, liking for you, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanness</td>
<td>Indications of meanness on Facebook—mean comments, exclusion, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>Reporting that they engage in any type of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power</strong></td>
<td>Indication of power dynamics at play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feelings</strong></td>
<td>Participant mentions his/her feelings—examples could include: exclusion, isolation, happiness, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>Who they think looks at their pictures and how they make decisions about posting based on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
<td>Participant indicates that he/she is aware of how things might be perceived by others. Doesn’t necessarily result in change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K: SAMPLE CODED OUTPUT FOR APPEARANCE CODE

Reference 1 - 0.25 percent Coverage

Interviewer: Yeah.
CW: Um, I don’t really care personally, I mean when I put one up I’ll be like, “Oh I just want to put this picture up because I like the picture and I think I look good in it.”
Interviewer: Yeah. CW: And whatever and I’m with my friends, Interviewer: Yeah.

Reference 2 - 0.43 percent Coverage

but if you, I mean people go out and they’re like, “Alright today I’m gonna make a new profile picture,” Interviewer: Okay. CW: “And spend like 3 hours like going around like taking artsy pictures.” Interviewer: Yeah.
CW: Then obviously when you’re posting it, you don’t just want to be like, “Okay I want like my three best friends to see this.” You want to be like, “I want a good, I’m proud of this picture and I want like a good portion of people, I mean guys, too to see this.”

Reference 3 - 1.08 percent Coverage

Okay, alright so you just brought up two things; one is the photo, what I’m calling the photo shoot right which is like the full getup like going into the backyard, posing for a while,
CW: Yeah. Interviewer: To get the perfect shot, okay is that pretty common? CW: Yeah [laughs]. Interviewer: Okay, um and it’s pretty obvious. CW: Yeah.
Interviewer: Like when you look at it, okay so what is, the point of that is just to get this like perfect, great shot?
CW: Yeah well I mean sometimes it’s fun to like, Interviewer: Yeah. CW: I mean it’s fun, it’s nice to get a really good picture of yourself. Interviewer: Yeah. CW: If you find one that’s really good, you’ll be like, “Oh wow I’m pretty.” Interviewer: Right. CW: And like, Interviewer: Right.
CW: Um, feel good about yourself. Um, but yeah people do go out and they like, and my friends sometimes come over and they’re like, “Hey photo shoot?”[Laughs] and then they like, then you go do it but,
Interviewer: Okay so but the whole point of that is to get a Facebook profile picture pretty much or is that not?
CW: I mean the, the original point is to get a Facebook profile picture but for mine, for me it’s
REFERENCES


Project Zero “Visual Art Coding Scheme” shared by Carrie James in 2012.


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Tiggemann, Marika, Maria Gardiner, and Amy Slater. 2000. “‘I would rather be a size 10 than get straight A’s’: A focus group study of adolescent girls’ wish to be thinner” Journal of Adolescence 23:645-59.


CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Boston University, Boston, MA 2014
- PhD candidate in Sociology
- Dissertation *The Highlight Reel and Real Me: How Adolescents Construct the Facebook Fable* to be completed June 2014.
- Coursework in sociological theory and research methods. Served as a teaching fellow for two semesters of undergraduate medical sociology course. Research interests are medical sociology, social networks, adolescent health and gender studies.
- Critical essays in Medical Sociology and Identity Formation defended May 2009.

Brown University, Providence, RI 2007
- Masters of Public Policy
- Selected by Sociology Department to be a teaching fellow based on academic performance, Spring 2006.

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 2000
- Bachelor of Arts in Government, *Cum Laude.*
- Harvard College Scholarship for Academic Merit, Agassiz Merit Certificate.
- Coursework in Social Policy, Economics, Statistics and Comparative Politics.
- Senior Thesis *magna cum laude plus.* Title: *Child Care Policy in the United States: Working Women Divided Opinion.* Research included multivariate regression analysis of the *General Social Surveys* using SPSS and STATA.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Project Director, 21st Century Athenas 2013-present
- Coordinated and managed all qualitative research for Dr. Liang and Dr. Spencer’s research on high achieving girls and stress.
- Managed a team of Boston College graduate students to code and conduct literature reviews.
• Gave several presentations on the data to parents and faculty members.

Research Assistant and Project Director, Understanding the Mentoring Process  
2009-present
• Created the codebook and narrative summary template for all qualitative research.
• Managed a team of 5-10 undergraduate and masters student coders.
• Qualitative research has resulted in several conference presentations and journal articles.

• Conducted data analysis for Dr. Kelly Hallman’s project examining the connection between HIV/AIDS rates and adolescent girls’ social capital and financial literacy. Ran descriptive statistics and multivariate regressions in STATA on the survey data to determine significant relationships.
• Results were compiled into Excel tables and summarized in a paper. Working paper “Youth Financial Literacy, Social Capital and HIV/AIDS Knowledge” submitted for peer review.

Harvard Business School, Research Associate 2000-2001

PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP, Research Consultant 2000
• Estimated market size for several clients seeking to increase revenue. Examined potential customer base and analyzed competitors’ financial statements. Projected the cost for a client to convert to an online retail company and the subsequent impact on the company’s financial statements.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Boston University, Boston, MA 2007-2013
Teaching Fellow
• Served as a teaching fellow in Society and Technology for Professors Smith-Doerr and DeLisi. Granted opportunities to lecture on adolescent Facebook
usage. Led group projects, organized guest speakers and graded all assessments. Attended all lectures.

- Served as a teaching fellow in Medical Sociology for both Professors Guseva and Olafsdottir. Granted opportunity to lecture on gender and health and HIV. Led sections for Professor Guseva and graded all assessments for both. Attended all lectures.
- Served as a teaching fellow in Introduction to Sociological Theory for Professors Stone and Coulter. Led three sections each semester, graded papers and attended lectures. Gave the medical sociology lecture for Professor Stone’s course.

**Brown University, Providence RI 2006-2007**

**Teaching Fellow**

- Served as a teaching fellow in Economic Sociology and Public Policy and Sociology. Attended lectures, coordinated readings and technology and graded all papers. Worked one on one with students in mandatory writing workshop. Gave two lectures on Marx in Economic Sociology.

**Noble and Greenough School, Dedham, MA, 2001-2005**

**10th Grade Class Dean, Upper School Teacher and Varsity Boys’ Crew Coach**

- Monitored the academic progress of 120 tenth grade students and taught AP European History and World History.
- Served as Resident Director of Boarding, admission officer, academic advisor, and advisor to the Gay Straight Alliance.
- Head varsity boys’ crew coach: only female head coach of a varsity boys’ team in New England. Led the team to a semifinal finish at the Henley Royal Regatta in England in 2003.

**ARTICLES/CHAPTERS IN PRESS/UNDER REVIEW**

- Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., Walsh, J., & Drew, A. (Accepted for Publication). Breaking up is hard to do: How and why youth mentoring relationships end. Youth and Society

**CONFERENCES AND PAPERS**

- Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., Walsh, J., & Drew, A. (January 2014). Breaking up is hard to do: What we know about match endings and how
agencies can help. Workshop to be presented at the National Mentoring Summit, Washington, D.C.

- Liang, B., Spencer, R., and Walsh, J (October 2013) *Cultivating Resilience and Achievement* Workshop presented to faculty and parents at the Dana Hall School.
- Third Annual US/UK Medical Sociology Conference (July 2008)

**ADDITIONAL TRAINING**

Klingenstein Summer Institute, Columbia’s Teachers College, Columbia University (Summer 2004)

- Selected as one of the most promising young private school teachers in the country. Granted fellowship to study leadership and teaching practices through Columbia’s Teachers College.

**SKILLS**

- Extensive work with the following software: Microsoft Office, NVivo, STATA, SPSS, ATLAS.ti, GIS and Access.
• Languages: French (proficient in speaking and reading), Spanish (beginner in reading and speaking).