

THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

STALKING, CREEPING, AND UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION:  
COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF FACEBOOK

By

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*A Paper submitted*  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Bachelor of Science Degree  
In Advertising Public Relations

Degree Awarded  
20123, 2013

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Rationale.....	7
Literature Review Overview .....	9
Literature Review .....	10
Eavesdropping.....	11
Facebook Stalking.....	13
Communication within Facebook .....	15
Research Questions .....	17
Methods.....	18
Data Analysis .....	21
Results .....	22
Active Uncertainty Reduction.....	24
Passive Uncertainty Reduction.....	27
Discussion/Conclusions .....	28
Limitations .....	32
Future Research.....	33
References .....	36
Appendix.....	40
Semi-structured Interview Questions .....	40

**Abstract**STALKING, CREEPING, AND UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION: COLLEGE STUDENTS'  
USE OF FACEBOOK

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This study examined two types of Facebook use: active and passive uncertainty reduction. Each form was further categorized by motivation: hedonistic, academic, or casual use. The study's method included usability with a follow-up interview in individual sessions from a convenience sample. College students engage in both active and passive uncertainty reduction processes on Facebook and do so for hedonistic, academic, and casual purposes, with casual use being most commonly expressed. Although both active and passive processes are most often done for one motive, there is also evidence that users possess all three motives in one uncertainty reduction process, or when transitioning from one process to another. The study's findings are likely to be present in other social media networks.

## **Introduction**

Whether intentional or unintentional, humans are guilty of eavesdropping. In the digital age where social media has become more central in our lives, we have even more opportunity to eavesdrop on other people. The contents of this paper will delve into the virtual world of “Facebook stalking.”

Real world stalking is expressed as “a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear” (Stalking Information, 2012). Facebook stalking is similar, but is better defined as using Facebook to do virtual personal research on others without their knowledge; fear cannot be directly felt by the victim in every instance. A general consensus felt by users is that the action is disturbing, since it can take place at any time and be implemented on anyone. Due to the way Facebook is designed, Facebook users do not know their profile page is being examined, unless a post is commented on or “liked” by a user, or if the update is brought up in everyday conversation. Facebook stalking can be completely hidden, and often never discovered. It is also known as “creeping,” which diminishes or disguises the severity of the act. Users may examine status updates, photos, videos, personal information, and anything else victims share on their pages.

There are privacy measures on this network to ensure certain groups of people are not allowed to view certain areas of their profile. Users can hide information by

enhancing their privacy settings to block most information and posts from the public, with the exception of some basic information. Nonetheless, Facebook often changes its privacy settings, and some users may not know the full reach that their profile's information is being seen by others. Cautious users monitor every update they send out. Even with such caution, there are means of evading these privacy restrictions and still being able to access the desired information.

One such method of Facebook stalking is the use of special applications or websites for Facebook. People can code their own applications or design a separate site to aid the Facebook stalking process. When the Breakup Notifier application was added to Facebook, users could receive e-mails whenever a user changed their relationship status. However, Facebook removed the application for privacy reasons but the idea turned into a separate website. (Zimmerman, 2011). There is still a fan page on Facebook for the Breakup Notifier site, and users can continue to be updated via e-mail (Zimmerman, 2011).

With or without special applications and websites, users can still virtually stalk others on Facebook with a little time and dedication. Facebook simply cannot eliminate all stalking risks and even allows marketers to garner target audience demographics using Facebook. Marketers are constantly pushing to gain added information about users to better their companies. This is partly the reason for the Facebook boycotts

regarding the site's privacy terms and conditions which are constantly tweaked. It is impossible to please everyone but users must not forget that whatever one posts online, although they may think it's hidden; it is actually still there (Majeau, R. 2012).

### **Rationale**

The researcher attended an informational session led by RIT Center for Women and Gender's Darci Lane-Williams, Assistant Director for Counseling and Advocacy. The session, entitled, "The Use of Technology to Stalk," overviewed the dangerously simple methods stalkers use to attack their victims, including the use of social networking sites (Lane-Williams, 2012). "The majority of stalking victims are stalked by someone they know: 66% of female victims and 41% of male victims of stalking are stalked by a current or former intimate partner" (Stalking Information, 2012). This is relevant when discussing Facebook friends, any one of the multitude of peers one is connected to via this social networking platform has the devices to stalk a susceptible person. One simply can visit a user's profile page to find out more information, monitor their posts regularly, and discover where they habitually go via their check-ins in order to find the user in real life.

Facebook stalking is a fascinating topic to study because it addresses desensitization of privacy. Marketers and advertisers could take advantage of the fact that the millennial generation has less concern for privacy especially if Facebook

stalking could be desensitizing them further; millennials could be imitating peers they stalk on Facebook who show little regard for what they post (Horovitz, 2010). This study will investigate the college-aged generation who fall into this category of users.

This study aimed to examine active and passive uncertainty reduction processes which depended on the cognizance of the user engaging in Facebook use. A user actively viewing another user's profile page was the environment in which active uncertainty reduction was encountered, whereas a user's newsfeed, which displays to all users upon logging in, was the environment in which passive uncertainty reduction was encountered. The two types of Facebook usage categories that were provided for at the start of the study were hedonistic uncertainty reduction and casual uncertainty reduction. Hedonistic purposes are defined as perusing others' profiles to satisfy certain feelings of fulfillment. Such fulfillment includes sexual gratification and vicarious idolization of another. Often times, people ask themselves, "should I be like this person" or "should I date this person." Casual uncertainty reduction is the otherwise harmless form of primary research on another Facebook user. This can be done for purposeful, personal intent, such as "should I employ this person," "should I befriend this person," or "will finding out more about this person benefit me in some way?" Uncertainty reduction was, therefore, further parsed to include casual information gathering, information gathering for employment/work related purposes, and



information gathering with regards to familial or friendship connections. As the data was analyzed, these motive categories were further honed.

### **Literature Review Overview**

“Facebook stalking” in one of its most primal forms stems back to eavesdropping. People deliberately overhear conversations and form opinions of others. Although highly improbable, eavesdropping can evolve into a more time-consuming and sometimes violent behavior such as stalking for a select few. As of late, stalking has taken to the virtual world of Facebook, and concern should be expressed in understanding any desensitization effects it may have on users to stalk in the real world. Facebook stalking is associated with the Uses and Gratifications Theory as well as the Uncertainty Reduction Theory. When adding a Facebook friend for the first time, the user may want to get to know the person better, and implement methods presented by the Uncertainty Reduction Theory by analyzing their profile. This act reduces their uncertainty about the person who may have been solely an acquaintance at the time of request. People may also rationalize that Facebook stalking is innocent since it may meet their certain needs, and the action is unbeknownst to the victim.

## **Literature Review**

Uses and Gratifications Theory predicts that people use media to satisfy their specific needs. However the media has a limited effect on consumers because people can exercise their free-will and control. Since people are self-aware, they can articulate their reasons for media use (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Williams et al. (2010) found that “cyber-ostracism” is the act of “ignoring and excluding others” through internet-based communication (p.748). People may feel upset, experience a lack of control, and feel socially disconnected in these situations. From such instances, people may feel the need to re-establish this sense of social belonging by other means, such as Facebook usage, which can later progress to “Facebook stalking.”

Uncertainty Reduction Theory focuses on instances where strangers meet; they strive to reduce their level of uncertainty about each other in the situation because uncertainty is uncomfortable and awkward (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Of the two levels of uncertainty, one level of uncertainty is behavioral, where someone is unsure of how to behave or how the other person will behave. The other level is cognitive, where someone is unsure of what they think of the other person and what the other person thinks of them. If there is much uncertainty, there will be a variety of resulting verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

There is a sense of computer etiquette, and it can be argued that there is Facebook etiquette, where certain behaviors and responses are expected. This etiquette comes from experience with the site and each user's knowledge of digital interpersonal relationships. Users may have individual values when responding to a comment or "poke" that differ from others', for instance one may think it is a trivial act whereas someone else may perceive it as flirting. Cognitive and behavioral uncertainties come into play when a user does not know a person who might have messaged or friend requested them, and they do not know if they should answer them or accept the request. This can be felt on both sides of the message or request, with the requester left unsure if the person will choose to connect with them or ignore their messages. Potentially, the ignored user can become upset and dedicate some of their time utilizing Facebook to find out more about the person. At this point, they may find other means of connecting or even stalking their victim, maybe in person if they attend the same school, via other features of Facebook, or adding Facebook friends who are connected to their victim. In this manner, they can see updates in their newsfeed that involve both parties, and bond with these mutual friends about the victim via Facebook

### **Eavesdropping**

With our ever-expanding world of technology, people are finding it easier to get a closer look at their friends online through Facebook. Sharon Jayson of USA Today replies,

As a result, we're fast becoming a nation of casual eavesdroppers, where every day we tune in to a constant stream of updates on what others are saying and doing, from where they're about to eat lunch (complete with photos) to their conversations with others. All this sharing, some experts say, may be feeding a tendency toward exhibitionism, and devaluing the very privacy that earlier generations so desired (Jayson, 2010).

However, John Locke, a linguistics professor at the City University of New York contests that this increased ability to snoop isn't entirely detrimental. To the contrary, in his new book, Eavesdropping: An Intimate History, Locke does not think negatively of all forms of eavesdropping and describes it as a natural and often beneficial evolved human practice (2010). He also thinks that it is bad advice to teach people to mind their own business, further stating,

When we look at the eavesdroppers' motives, we sometimes find ourselves on a higher, more philosophical plain. For eavesdroppers go beyond what is given in search of something more. In that sense, Eavesdropping is about a behavior that exemplifies our abiding attempts to understand the human story---what goes on in the lives of others---and thus to understand what life is, and what one's own life could be (Locke, 2013, para. 2).

Eavesdropping isn't just listening in; it can involve visual aids as well, or in this case, using Facebook. It can get exciting, finding out new pieces of information that you

wouldn't have discovered had it not been for this site. For instance, "students can 'meet' their future roommates via an online profile," and reduce uncertainties early on about the stranger they will be living with (Scissors, 2007). Although Facebook was influential in the "initial stage of students' roommate relationships for impression formation and uncertainty reduction, ...offline experience and impression discrepancies have a greater influence later on in their relationship" (Lai, 2011, p. 91).

This sneaky act can also be broken down into forced or intentional eavesdropping. If someone overhears a loud person on the phone, it is much different than trying to listen in on a phone conversation where the victim is whispering. People want the option of "tuning in" which is why Facebook stalking fulfills that need (Locke, 2010). Eavesdropping on a phone conversation is also enhanced by another factor. "Perhaps this commitment to understand is in some way automatically triggered when hearing only one side of a conversation. For example hearing a question could be particularly intrusive if one does not immediately hear the answer of the other person" (Monk, Carroll, Parker, & Blythe, 2007, p. 33-34). People may be more intrigued to listen into a conversation because since they cannot hear the other end; they feel they are causing no harm.

### **Facebook Stalking**

An interesting variable to consider is that people nowadays have less and less privacy, especially online. "Younger folks are used to sharing information. Call it

the Facebook effect. Younger consumers are more comfortable than are their parents about sharing a great deal of information online” (Horovitz, 2010, Key factors section, para. 2). There have been numerous squabbles over Facebook’s constant changes to their privacy features, yet for the most part, users still display a vast amount of personal information. People have become more open, and that’s why when it comes to “Facebook stalking,” the act can be refuted as innocent behavior.

Unfortunately, sometimes Facebook stalking can escalate into something more violent than just viewing others’ profiles without their knowledge. Cyber-bullying may lead to actual stalking, defined as any form of online conduct that generates considerable emotional distress (Proffitt, 2009). People may make fake aliases which persuades a user to accept a friend request, by pretending to be someone else. As a result, situations can escalate and cause long-term side effects for the victims. In one lawsuit, a 27-year-old man stalked female students on Facebook by asking them intimate questions and insisting that they disrobe on camera. (Los Angeles Times, 2010). A more recent incident involved the deception experienced by Notre Dame football player, Manti Te’o. His “girlfriend,” whom he’d met on Facebook three years prior, even engaged in phone call conversations. Unfortunately, she suffered from leukemia and died September 2012. However, she turned out to be completely fabricated and the culprit publicly admitted to the hoax shortly thereafter (Whitt, 2013).

One study holds that Facebook stalking “facilitates behaviors that are indicative of obsessive relational intrusion” (Chaulk & Jones, 2011 p.245). It found that Facebook stalking consists of one or more of the following forms of intrusion: “primary contact attempts, secondary contact attempts (i.e., contacting others connected to the target), monitoring or surveillance, expressions, and invitations” (Chaulk & Jones, 2011 p.245). Those involved spent many hours a day on the site, most of which they were checking others’ activities and making incidental contacts. Many participants had more than 200 “friends” which suggests that little to no criteria is used to add them, illustrating the superficiality of having hundreds of friends (Chaulk & Jones, 2011 p.251). Oftentimes people use Facebook to check up on ex-intimates and targets are not aware of others’ monitoring activities. Such monitoring activities and incidental contacts account for the most time spent on Facebook (Chaulk & Jones, 2011). Facebook usage has been compared to voyeurism; the term is often associated with acts private in nature but since Facebook is a virtually public place, media voyeurism is a more appropriate term. Su (2012) suggests two social needs for voyeurism: social comparison and social identity, and three motivations: surveillance, uncertainty reduction, and uses and gratifications, as responsible for users’ voyeuristic tendencies on Facebook.

### **Communication within Facebook**

Facebook can be viewed as an extension of face-to-face communication and interaction. Computer-mediated communication can both maintain and develop new

interpersonal relationships. "When used as a substitute, the effects of CMC on interpersonal relationships are negative and lead to a deindividuating experience, but when used as a complement to face-to-face interaction, CMC facilitates the maintenance of interpersonal relationships" (Kujath, 2011 p.75). This is significant because if a person does not know their target well before establishing a connection on Facebook and subsequently stalks them to find out more, the person may develop more negative opinions about the target than if they had known the person well previously. Additionally, this provides that maintaining existing relationships can be positively executed with Facebook uncertainty reduction processes.

Interestingly, another study found that females, more so than males, feel more comfortable using social technologies than communicating in person (Pierce, 2009). Another piece of importance is that people who have inhibitions and are more timid in nature when it comes to communicating with others feel more at ease using technology to elude this issue (Pierce, 2009). Facebook serves as the tool to reduce the discomfort these people have, because their "Facebook stalking" can go completely unnoticed. The Facebook chat feature also helps these users feel more comfortable talking to their peers without having to physically see or speak to them.

Through the above literature analysis, two essential theories were examined: Uses and Gratifications and Uncertainty Reduction. The former explains why people



may turn to Facebook, the latter clarifies a rationale for why people Facebook stalk, especially with those one may not know very well. Additionally, eavesdropping was dissected. People want to be given the option to listen in, and not be forced to overhear a loud conversation. Facebook stalking satisfies this desire even when victims have low security standards for their profile, because the victim doesn't have a way of knowing who "creeps" on them. But what if this was not the case and victims had a way of knowing exactly who was on their profile, when, and what they were doing there? Would it then still be considered Facebook stalking? That is a question for another study, however.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher is curious to understand college students' uncertainty reduction processes. It has previously been mentioned that the Millennial Generation exercises a low amount of caution when posting online (Horovitz, 2010). By executing this study with college students, insight was gathered considering their lessened desire of privacy. Indeed, this can optimize uncertainty reduction collections; it is safe to conjecture that more honest representations of selves tend to be portrayed with privacy abandonment.

The following research questions address the broad focus of this study; the holistic view of uncertainty reduction processes:

1. How do Facebook users use Facebook to reduce uncertainty about fellow Facebook users?
2. Do participants have more than one motive while engaging in a Facebook uncertainty reduction process?
3. Which is/are the most common reason(s) for active uncertainty reduction?
4. Which is/are the most common reason(s) for passive uncertainty reduction?
5. What do the findings from the above questions tell us about the application of Uncertainty Reduction Theory to social networking sites like Facebook?

### **Methods**

To investigate the research questions, participants were instructed to engage in normal Facebook use for five minutes, followed with an interview. Students in a communication class at RIT were recruited as participants. A sign-up sheet was distributed, with timeslots in thirty-minute intervals, so that students could sign up for a one-on-one session with the researcher. Subjects were informed to bring their laptops for the usability section of the study and to refrain from Facebook usage for one hour prior to their session.

During each scheduled time, the participant arrived to the reserved Wallace Library room, and was instructed to start their laptop and navigate to Facebook, but not sign into the website. The researcher gave them each a copy of the consent form while

their laptop was loading. In a casual manner, before the session began, the researcher asked each participant if they had used Facebook in the past hour, to make sure participants did not indeed do so.

Once the participant was done reading the consent form and ready to sign into Facebook, the researcher reminded them that they would be using Facebook for five minutes and then interviewed on what they did. Once the five minutes were completed, the researcher assured participants that they need not disclose any personal information about themselves or others, most importantly names, and asked to be as honest about their actions as possible in the following interview session. The researcher then interviewed each participant with the semi-structured questions, occasionally probing for more elaboration and information. The interviewer asked questions pertaining to the personal Facebook newsfeed, questions pertaining to visiting another user's Facebook profile, and demographic questions. As a default, Facebook automatically shows the user's personal newsfeed immediately after signing in. However, if, for instance, a participant did not view another user's Facebook profile during the five minutes, they were asked to recall the last time they did so in order to answer the questions in that section.

In order to optimize normalcy and comfort with the research environment, participants were informed that the researcher would not need to see their laptop

screens in the process. By doing so, the researcher allotted participants their privacy which facilitated normal behavior. Without this, participants might have been wary in their Facebook usage processes and perhaps not clicked on a certain image, profile, message, or the like, for fear of judgment. The researcher invited the participants to sit wherever they feel most comfortable; which more often than not was across the table from the researcher. Subsequently, the researcher's laptop screen was somewhat visible to passersby via the glass wall, whereas the participants' screens were facing a brick wall within the library room.

There were a total of four interview days in which participants engaged in the sessions of usability testing and interviews. Each one-on-one session from the participant's arrival did not exceed the timeslot of 30 minutes. There was only an overlap into timeslots on a day where the RIT campus was experiencing technical difficulties with the Wi-Fi connection. Neither participants' laptops nor the researcher's back-up rental laptop from the library could connect to the internet. So as not to confound variables by allowing participants to use the researcher's working laptop to complete the five minutes of usability testing on Facebook, two participants instead used the computers on the second floor of the library which have a wired connection to the Internet. Another participant did arrive without a laptop, and instead used the back-up rental laptop. In totality, 10 participants had the optimal situation of using their own laptop, whereas the remaining three used a library computer.

The ordering of the questions is significant and logically-driven, because the study primarily involves progression of Facebook activity (See Appendix). To progress communication, any questions or sample answers were unbiased in nature and aimed to provide clarification of the activity the participant described. After both the usability and interview components were finished, the session was concluded.

In all communications with participants, the terms “Facebook stalking” and “Facebook creeping” were avoided so as not to bias their opinions toward the activity. Bringing attention to these terms could have made participants reflect on their actions and instead not engage in behavior associated with these terms while in the usability section of the study.

Immediately following completion of all participants’ interviews, the researcher compiled the responses to the interview questions along with any side notes in an excel spreadsheet. This aimed to inhibit data loss and organize data in a central location.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative approach was implemented, which aimed to discover the Five W’s and one H (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How), revolving around uncertainty reduction processes among participants using Facebook. Each of these W’s were accounted for in the interview questions, in both the active and passive sections of the interview, and helped comprehend each participants’ entire active and passive uncertainty reduction processes.

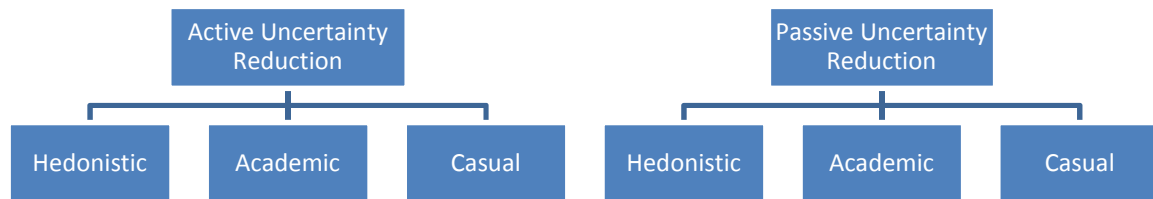
Analyzing the data was inductive in nature, and incorporated the traditional research model. This stemmed from both the Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The researcher had a predetermined set of categories in which to classify the data: active or passive uncertainty reduction processes, and for either hedonistic or casual use. Participants' responses were evaluated against each other in order to better develop grouping categories. A new category that arose from the data was academic use, in both active and passive uncertainty reduction processes.

Since people use symbols to express themselves, researchers can better understand subjects by dissecting their metaphors. Mehrabian discovered that the majority of communication is nonverbal (1967), so in a sense, people are used by language and language limits the way people see the world; sometimes people put up veneers to hide their true selves using metaphors which express inner emotions (Burke, 1966). To better understand subjects, the researcher dissected and categorized metaphors, which represent true feelings and perspectives to describe situations of phenomena (Burke, 1966). Finally, each participant was labeled with the appropriate uncertainty reduction motives they expressed in their active and passive processes on the whole.

## **Results**

Participants' responses were grouped into the categories of active uncertainty reduction processes and passive uncertainty reduction processes. The former is

classified as the methods involved in visiting another user's Facebook profile page. The latter is described as the participant's viewing of their personal Facebook newsfeed, which displays upon logging in. These processes were then categorized as hedonistic use, academic use, and casual uncertainty reduction.



An unanticipated category, academic use, was added after analyzing the data, and encompassed uncertainty reduction processes involving school-related clubs and courses. With this holistic coding scheme, Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory are accounted for.

The age range for the 13 participants was 19 to 24 years old, who were 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> - year students. Both males and females participated, representing majors ranging from business to engineering. Attention was also given to comparing males' perceptions of usage against females' perceptions as mentioned earlier. One participant did note that

they usually spend less than five minutes on Facebook, "I try to get off Facebook in under five minutes. Unless someone's interacting with me, I try not to spend a lot of time there." This same participant also provided a thought-provoking experience where a photo in his newsfeed made him more (as opposed to less) inquisitive about the person involved. Specifically, he saw a photo of his friend with his dog and wondered how he was able to bring the dog to college, but did learn that his friend intends to bring his dog to college to visit occasionally.

### **Active Uncertainty Reduction**

Methods of active uncertainty reduction were most commonly sparked from viewing a newsfeed update. These took on the form of others' status/photo updates (including desire to see before and after updates the user posted relating to it), being tagged in a status/photo, relationship status changes, an "in the moment sort of thing" when using the chat feature with someone, or, "if something sparks it, like if I know someone moves somewhere or if I know someone went on a trip, I'll search for it." Sometimes it occurs as a result of a Facebook notification, "she commented on my picture and I clicked on her name. I was like, oh, I wonder what she's doing, click." Every participant was also asked how often they find themselves looking at another user's profile; one participant noted they do it, "every time I'm on Facebook," while the rest noted "sometimes" or "rarely."



When analyzing the rationale for engaging in active uncertainty reduction, most participants did so purely for casual purposes. Casual use was classified as activity involving acquaintances, friends, or family members. A couple respondents noted something along the lines of, "If I don't know the person very well I will look at their profile immediately, when they friend request me." This emphasizes reducing uncertainties with strangers or acquaintances, and aids the user's judgment in considering whether or not they want to accept the friend request. The most common response for casual use was not having seen someone in a while; one participant noted it is, "almost like a guilt thing." As mentioned earlier, computer-mediated communication aids in maintaining interpersonal relationships when used as a complement to face-to-face interaction (Kujath, 2011 p.75). What this participant implied was that she felt badly for not being involved in others' lives, and assuages her guilt by strengthening her connection with people she hasn't seen in a while by means of reviewing recent happenings they share on their profile. In a different instance, a participant clicked through to a friend's page and discovered he was in a relationship. The partner's name wasn't listed but if her account was linked from there, he would have clicked through to see her profile as well. This would have shown a casual use and potentially hedonistic use. Overall, most respondents mentioned, "I don't normally look at others' profiles on Facebook," however all could recollect an instance that they had done so recently.

A few respondents also noted active uncertainty reduction processes that corresponded to academic use. Participants checked academic group pages that they manage and responded to messages, as well as researched academic groups on campus. This went on to include viewing the profile page of the president of one of these academic groups. Another respondent actively searched for her class Facebook fan page in order to check her homework assignment.

Active uncertainty reduction was also analyzed against hedonistic purposes. Only male respondents admitted to usage that was of a hedonistic nature. One such participant noted that they looked at a female's profile, "she would be a potential dating partner but she's dating someone." Later, when discussing looking at her pictures, he mentioned, "Man, I feel like a stalker." Another participant noted that when looking at pictures, "I never look at their profile picture right away because that's always their best picture, so I take their tagged photos to see how they really look, if they're hot or not, if they edited it 17 times." A final participant stated that by looking at the female's profile he, "made assumptions based on the photos and who was tagged." This helped him understand who she was friends with via the tags, and realized he knew most of them. Furthermore, participants did not disclose whether or not looking at images of users on their profiles, who were of the same sex, was intended as vicarious idolization.

**Passive Uncertainty Reduction**

Passive uncertainty reduction behavior included gathering information from, and interacting with updates on participants' personal newsfeeds. In the casual sense, a handful of respondents expressed enjoyment of intriguing political articles or comical images. One participant described his usage as, "making sure it wastes time, as much as possible... I usually scroll through my newsfeed to see if anything catches my attention... I don't really like or comment on anything unless it blows me away." This upholds the belief that many college students use Facebook to procrastinate, and also notes that interaction among users takes place when an update in the newsfeed sparks interest; this interaction has the potential to lead to uncertainty reduction processes between both parties via understanding of others' beliefs and behaviors, in the internet realm, and potentially in real life. In one instance, a participant did not learn about the update poster himself, but rather an acquaintance the post was about, who he did not know very well. Looking at others' photos and status updates merely to see what they are up to was also a common trait, "I just like to see people's pictures and see what people are doing." Some expressed the desire to "catch up" on their newsfeed posts, which may have been due to the imposed restriction of not being able to use Facebook for at least an hour before their session.

Academic use in passive uncertainty reduction processes was only expressed in one instance. A participant was a member of an engineering group, and a post from

said group showed up in his newsfeed. It was a comical yet mathematical meme (image) that he noted, “stereotypes the people in the group that follows it.” This expresses how the participant was able to confirm his uncertainties about the group as a whole via an image.

In the hedonistic sense, passive uncertainty reduction would be expressed when users compare oneself to members of the same sex, or view images of potential dating partners. From the interviews, looking at photos of potential dating partners was expressed, but once again, participants did not disclose whether or not looking at images of users of the same sex was done by means of vicarious idolization.

Nevertheless, one participant stated that besides scrolling the newsfeed, the most time consuming activity they engage in on Facebook was, “looking at peoples pictures... I know that sounds creepy.” In actuality, many respondents noted they spend a lot of time looking at others’ pictures that show up in their newsfeeds, with some mentioning doing so for hedonistic purposes; one participant noted looking at an erotic photo on his newsfeed for a while.

### **Discussion/Conclusions**

This study focused on participants’ uncertainty reduction processes as they relate to Facebook. When encountering a profile that blocks many sections, users are limited

in the information garnering process. Once a user “friends” another user with a restricted profile not visible to the “public,” they are able to discover much more about a person without ever having to meet or talk, both virtually or in the real world. Such instances provide a foundation to understanding a person better upon virtual or real world interactions.

All participants at least briefly scrolled through their newsfeed in the five minute usability period, therefore all participants engaged in passive uncertainty reduction. Five participants viewed one or more profile pages in the five minutes of usability, which classifies them in the active uncertainty reduction category exclusively within the timeframe of the study itself. However, all participants were able to recall a recent experience looking at another person’s profile page even if they hadn’t done so in the usability period. Thus, all participants expressed behavior associated with both active and passive uncertainty reduction, as it relates to their average Facebook usage.

It can be conjectured that uncertainty reduction within Facebook shapes both cognitive and behavioral levels of interactions with others in future real-world and Facebook interactions. “Facebook stalking” is also both forced and intentional, like eavesdropping. As discovered from this study, the forced form was associated with passive uncertainty reduction, as expressed by the presence of the personal Facebook newsfeed displaying others’ recent updates. Intentional eavesdropping was displayed via active uncertainty reduction, where users search or click through to another

Facebook user. Overall, this study provided another interpretation of voyeurism, as investigated in Su's examination of it within social networking sites (2012).

Participants did express usage of Facebook for casual uncertainty reduction. This included checking up on acquaintances, friends, and family members. Participants did not however reduce a substantial amount of uncertainty about those they were already familiar with. Nonetheless, when users did not previously know the user well, a larger portion of information was gathered when viewing their profile page. Participants looked at more sections of the user's profile and expressed definite findings about the person. In the case of a participant describing viewing another's profile who they just added as a Facebook friend, this particular participant inspected the most features of the user's profile, encompassing the following sections: About, Job/employment, School, Living, Pictures/Videos, (Mutual) Friends, and the user's personal feed. He did express the notion that he discovered information that he wouldn't have otherwise gathered in a face-to-face interaction, and noted, "playing stupid" in person about information he had collected from viewing her Facebook profile.

Conversely, one participant mentioned that when having a long conversation in the chat feature with a female friend, who happened to be a potential dating partner, he would click through to her profile. He reported that he would, "scroll through it, and maybe I'll bring up something from her page and ask about it." This exemplifies an

open way of communicating uncertainties about a person, with said person having knowledge that their post was viewed by the other party; “Facebook stalking” that is not hidden. Sometimes, participants encountered profiles that were blocked and provided limited information to public users. “If it wasn’t blocked, I would have looked at the wall and all the postings on it,” one participant said. Fundamentally, engaging in uncertainty reduction processes on Facebook give users the advantage to better communicate and understand others in person and in the virtual world, whether or not victims are aware of the Facebook stalking that has taken place.

This study found that participants used both active and passive uncertainty reduction processes to accumulate knowledge via viewing others’ profiles and newsfeed updates (R1). Newsfeeds and profile page viewing determine the consciousness of uncertainty reduction processes on Facebook. Second, participants therefore can use Facebook to reduce uncertainty for more than one reason per process. Referring back to a participant who looked at the profile page of a club president, given the opportunity to view the relationship partner’s profile page, he could have engaged in all three motives of academic, followed by hedonistic and/or casual use (R2). Third, participants tended to communicate experiencing passive uncertainty reduction processes more often than active, more often than not; however, both were done for casual purposes (R3, R4). Overall, uncertainty reduction is done for more casual purposes. This makes sense because users have hundreds of friends and cannot actively

or passively engage in uncertainty reduction processes for every friend or user they search (R5). Nevertheless, users do express instances of uncertainty reduction processes for hedonistic and academic use as well. Clearly, Uncertainty Reduction Theory can be applied to virtual worlds like Facebook, though it should be viewed as a supplemental component to real-world uncertainty reduction.

### **Limitations**

This study's limitations include the researcher's inexperience implementing a qualitative content analysis to categorize data. The sample was a convenience sample. Additionally, there is always a slight risk that participants may intentionally or unintentionally skew the data. They may have had inklings as to what the study was about, and may have been suspicious about the vague description the researcher provided. Then, they could have engaged in activities and provided answers they felt the researcher was looking for, which would consist of over-reporting good behaviors and under-reporting bad behavior, known as social desirability bias. Such bias provides for components of self-deception and other-deception (Nederhof, 1985). Acquiescence bias should also be accounted for due to the laid back environment and in instances where the researcher provided sample answers to questions to better understand the participants' usage.

This [acquiescence bias] can be created by the interviewer or the respondent being friendly during the interview, or the respondent feeling that



they have to give the "right" answer, i.e. not wishing to offend the interviewer.

This systemic bias can also be known as the "friendliness effect." (DJS Research Ltd, 2013)

Moreover, this study was based on participants' recall of Facebook experiences, and did not document the experiences themselves. With that in mind, females did not express any instances of hedonistic use in uncertainty reduction processes. In fact, generalizations about the population of college students cannot be soundly supported with this study alone. Nevertheless, the study was an interesting endeavor to execute, providing results that promote understanding of "Facebook stalking" processes and motives.

### **Future Research**

This study opens up the possibility for further research in a variety of modes. Although this study utilized a convenience sample, the researcher believes that if replicated (with or without a random sample) similar results will be obtained. If repeated, effort should be put into conducting a purely random sample of participants to better represent the demographic. Eye-tracking software could also be incorporated to delve into how long people look at other users' profiles, to discover what the average time one spends looking at a picture, status, etc. A mix of both qualitative and quantitative approaches could be encompassed as well. Another facet of interest that was not examined would be to inspect Facebook fan page or event page uncertainty

reduction in the sense of how users determine their desire to “Like” a fan page or attend an event via reading others’ opinions and clarifications concerning the topic on such “walls.” Such a study would be of significant importance to marketers and advertisers alike.

Simply duplicating this study, but with another age demographic, such as Baby Boomers could return interesting results as well. Such a group may not know all the inner-workings of Facebook as well as college students may. Then, perhaps comparing both generations’ results could prove intriguing. Another modification would be to investigate a different social networking site, such as LinkedIn. Since it is regarded as a highly professional site, LinkedIn usage will indeed differ from that of Facebook usage. This site actually shows users who visit their LinkedIn profile pages, unlike Facebook. It would be curious to discover whether or not this feature inhibits users from viewing another user’s profile page.

Another incredible yet disturbing topic is the new feature Facebook will implement called graph search. The company describes graph search as a way to “look up anything shared with you on Facebook, and others can find stuff you’ve shared with them. Each person sees unique results” (Introducing Graph Search, 2013). Facebook is marketing the tool by stating, “Graph Search helps you find people, places and things—and explore Facebook in a whole new way” (Introducing Graph Search, 2013). Privacy

settings are taken into account, however, any Facebook user can find information about another user as long as they are not blocked. Although searching any user is currently possible, this further decreases the effort necessary to find a random user, or a Facebook friend alike. The possibilities are seemingly endless, seeing that the user defines the search terms, further proving the fascination concerning how much information can be discovered about a person online; nothing is totally hidden. This would indeed be an enhancement worth studying among college students.

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## Appendix

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

The following section pertains solely to your Facebook newsfeed.

1. Please provide a summary of the 5 minutes you spent using Facebook.
2. Was there any particular update in your feed that caught your attention and that made you spend more time looking at, interacting with, or thinking about?
3. Did you share a comment, "Like," or take a particular action (like posting something on this person's wall) as a result of seeing this person's post?
4. Without revealing this person's personal identity or information, whose status did you spend the most time on, are they male/female and what's their age? What would you say is the nature of your relationship with this person: friend, classmate, boyfriend/girlfriend, family member, etc.?
5. What was the content of the post? Was it an image, etc.?
6. Was the post about the person, and/or was the person in the image(s)?
7. Would you say you learned more about the person by viewing this image/post? Did it teach you anything about the person you did not already know?
8. If no, was it just that it was a pleasing picture of a person you think is attractive and that's why it caught your eye?
9. What do you normally find yourself spending the most time on while using Facebook?

If you visited someone's profile page during your session, please fill out the following section. If you did not, please recall the last time you visited someone's profile page.

1. What is this person's age and gender?
2. How did you navigate to this person's page?
3. Have you looked at this person's page before?
4. If so, how often (Rarely, Sometimes, Frequently) And in general how often do you look at people's profile pages and how do you get there?
5. Select the reason that most closely matches why you decided to view this person's page ("X" all that apply)

\_work-related ("I went to their page because I work with them or I am working with them on a class project.")



- \_potential dating partner (“I am attracted to this person.”)
- \_friendship related (“This is a friend of mine with no romantic possibilities.”)
- \_family member (“This is a family member of mine who I am checking up on.”)
- \_other(s)

6. Select where you visited on this person’s page (“X” all that apply)

- \_About
  - \_Job
  - \_School
  - \_Contact Info
  - \_Quote
  - \_History by Year
  - \_Living
  - \_Family
  - \_About “you”
- \_Pictures/Videos
- \_Friends
- \_Events
- \_Likes
- \_Map
- \_Apps
- \_Notes
- \_Their personal feed
- \_Other(s)

7. What, if anything, did you learn about this person from this session?

8. What, if anything, surprised you?

9. Did you discover anything you normally wouldn't in a face-to-face interaction?
10. What would make you look at this person's profile again?

Demographic Information

1. Year-level: 1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8
2. Major: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Sex: M      F