

THREE PERSPECTIVES OF RELATIONSHIPS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXT:  
MANAGING SELF-PRESENTATION, EVALUATING BRAND COMMUNICATION  
EFFECTIVENESS, AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGERS

by

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(Under the Direction of John Hulland)

ABSTRACT

Whether interacting with friends, searching for information, or relaxing, consumers are increasingly turning to social media tools to fulfill a variety of needs. Research shows at least 75% of adults who use the Internet use social media (Urstadt 2008). My research examines the influence and impact of social media from a number of perspectives. From a consumer perspective, I explore the tools that individuals employ to craft a desired self image to an online audience. Using a triangulation approach of in-depth interviews and focus groups, I uncover three primary motivations underlying the desire to protect the ego: a need for respect, a need to feel secure, and a need for acceptance. To manage these motivations, social network users employ self regulation techniques protect and enhance their ego.

My research also examines the influence of social media on integrated marketing communications. As the effectiveness of traditional advertising media declines, managers are looking to alternative communications channels such as social network games to reach consumers. The nature of social games necessitates a new approach to in-game branded messaging. Utilizing in-depth interviews and a content analysis of a popular game message

board, I develop a typology of gamer receptiveness to marketing communications. Findings suggest that social network gamers are receptive to brand message inclusion in a game when the promotion is aligned with the gamer's motivations for playing. Successful marketing communications requires brand managers to understand the player's motivations as well as the functionality of the game in order to design a promotion or message that is able to meet both the gamer's and the brand manager's goals.

In my final research study, I conduct in-depth interviews with brand and agency managers to understand how social media is incorporated into firms' overarching marketing communications strategies. Findings suggest that social media should be an integrated, consistent presence across all customer contact strategies, though the messaging included in social media channels must feel personalized to the consumer. Because the consumer is in control of the interaction, managers must demonstrate value in order to remain a part of the conversation.

INDEX WORDS:     Social Media, Social Networks, Social Network Gaming, Marketing  
                          Communications, Social Media Strategy, Qualitative Methodology, Self  
                          Presentation

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## DEDICATION

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social media is a highly influential force in today's society. Whether individuals are interacting with friends, searching for a job, or reading the news, social media often plays an integral role in satisfying those needs. Firms are also finding value in social media as a tool to listen and respond to customer concerns, generate positive word of mouth and viral message spreading, and develop deeper relationships with the firm's customers. As consumers and managers turn to social media to fulfill a niche need for interacting online, social media opportunities should be examined to understand both the marketing and societal implications of social media usage. Different social media platforms offer a diverse set of tools to facilitate interaction with other users. Savvy marketers are embracing the parallels between social media platform designs and the firm's goals, leading to firms that are able to better understand and fulfill customers' needs.

According to a recent CMO survey (Moorman 2013), the percent of marketing budgets allocated to social media will more than double over the next five years. The prevalence of social media is also a driving force in job creation; employers are increasingly seeking individuals with social media skills to develop the brand in the online space (Kapustin 2012). In 2012, the demand for social media managers grew by more than 30% (Ricker 2012). These statistics suggest that firms recognize the importance of social media, and they are attempting to identify tools and develop online strategies in response.

The present research seeks to examine social media from a number of perspectives. From a consumer perspective, it is important to understand how users interact with one another and firms that are present online. From a managerial perspective, understanding the implications of various marketing communications strategies in a social media context can assist managers in developing integrated communications plans that align with both consumer and firm expectations. The following sections provide a background summary for the remainder of the dissertation and are examined as follows: Social Media, The Consumer Perspective, The Managerial Perspective, and Methodology.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media has been defined as a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Research shows at least 75% of adults who use the Internet are using at least one form of social media (Stephen and Galak 2010; Urstadt 2008). The digital age has modified the way that consumers interact with one another and consumers' expectations of branded communications. Prior to social media, mass media communication channels such as TV and radio allowed brand managers to 'speak to' customers (Hoffman and Novak 1996). However, the proliferation of social media has instigated a revolution in the communications field, resulting in consumers expecting the brand to 'interact with' them in a medium where the consumer controls every aspect of the conversation—the timing, the channel, and the content.

*Social Networks.* Social networks are the most popular type of social media, with sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, attract more than 90% of young adults and teens, and represent over a quarter of all internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). Social networks are an online website that connects a user with others in a virtual space and allows the

user to display her essence through pictures, comments, activities, and associations (Schau and Gilly 2003; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). Social networks are designed to be a digital extension of one's real life activities and access must be granted by the user. While an individual may emphasize a certain aspect of her life within a social network, the functionality of a social network is such that the user shares a much more comprehensive image and is able to receive immediate feedback from the audience. A social network site is characterized as a web-based service that allows users to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile, (2) specify a list of users with whom they share a connection, and (3) consume and produce user generated content (Boyd and Ellison 2008; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). At the core of a social network site is a user profile, where users are able to build online biographies to represent themselves in a digital world. Users grant permission to one another to connect in the social space, thereby authorizing one another to view information that is not publicly available to others. The final characteristic of a social network is its impetus: user generated content. A social network user can consume content that is produced by others as well as produce and share content with others in her network (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010).

There are dozens of social networking platforms, some of which are specialized and highly restrictive while others are less restrictive and flexible for their users. As an example, LinkedIn is a specialized professional social network touting 150 million unique monthly visitors. LinkedIn is primarily used as a tool to develop a professional network, make career-relevant connections, and develop online referrals (eBiz.com 2011). LinkedIn users find value in promoting themselves online as well as seeking future employment and/or professional connections to advance their careers.

The most popular social network site, Facebook, boasts more than one billion unique monthly visitors, and is considered the largest leisure social network (Facebook 2012). Leisure sites such as Facebook were initially designed to keep close friends and family in touch and provide a way to share their lives online. However, the site has evolved into an extensive online platform where individuals connect with known and unknown others who share at least one similar interest. While on Facebook, users may choose to participate in games, chat online with one another, or visit the digital home (e.g. Wall) of other individuals or companies to see recent activities that have been shared. Facebook is an integral part of many consumers' daily routines, and as such, offers an interesting context in which to study consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand interactions. Facebook has permeated society in such a way that users often visit the social network multiple times per day by computer and/or mobile device. In many cases, users share major events through the social network instead of contacting people individually.

*Social Network Games.* Social network games are a highly popular, engaging activity for social network users. As of November 2012, more than 251 million Facebook users reported playing games on the social network (Olanoff 2012). Of those, 55 percent are female and spend more than an hour per day playing games (Kaevand 2011), breaking the traditional stereotype that gamers are prepubescent, socially challenged males (Chambers 2005). The impetus of social networks is to draw individuals together and share their lives online. In 2007, Facebook began offering its members the opportunity to play games with their network "Friends". Some social network gamers are members of a social network solely for the gaming experience, illustrative of the role of games in growing the social network's popularity. The introduction of social network games occurred 6 months prior to the introduction of brand Fan pages in Facebook, illustrative of the social network's emphasis on building and maintaining relationships online. Social network



games are a profitable venture for both game developers and social networks. As of 2012, 60% of the game developer industry's \$6.2 billion in revenue was generated through small, in-game purchases, with advertising revenue representing only 20% of the game developer's revenue stream (Casual Games Association 2012).

Games within social networks allow individuals to play together in a context that is neither temporally nor geographically restricted, allowing them to initiate, maintain, and enhance relationships with others in their network (Wohn et al. 2011). Social networks have gained in popularity over the past decade, with Facebook leading the revolution. Unlike advergames or other online game networks (e.g. World of Warcraft) that allow players to engage with completely unknown individuals, social network games require users to be connected in the social network in order to play together online. In contrast to traditional game designs, social network games shift the focus from beating the clock or eliminating competition in favor of a friendlier, more cooperative climate. Gamers interact by performing activities in each other's digital game space and sharing items for mutual benefit. Gamers may compete with one another, but this competition is often limited to being on top of various leader boards.

Hundreds of Social Network Games are available on Facebook, though most have only a modest number of active users. The largest social network game developer, Zynga, claims more than 248 million monthly active users. Zynga's portfolio includes 17 distinct social games that draw at least 200,000 daily users (App Data 2011). The most popular and longest running game, Farmville, was developed and introduced by Zynga in 2009; even three years later, the game continues to draw more than 10 million daily users. The longevity and popularity of Farmville, coupled with the researchers' knowledge of the game, provide a rich context with which to study both the consumer and managerial implications of interactions with a social network. The

overlapping nature of the game and the broader social network context can allow marketing communications to influence activities both inside and outside the scope of the game, thereby increasing the communication's reach and influence.

### **THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE**

Consumers are finding value in a wide variety of social media applications. Social media, and more specifically social networks, allow users to share pictures, important stories, and interact with one another online. The various types of interactions, coupled with the proliferation of social media, have resulted in users being much more cautious in crafting online self presentations. Social networking sites have the ability to bring vastly different groups of individuals together, which can create internal conflict in attempting to satisfy the very different expectations of various groups simultaneously (Biddle 1986). Goffman (1963; p. 138) suggests that such “discrepancies between virtual and actual identity ... give rise to the need for tension management ... and information control.” As such, individuals often resort to presenting different facets of themselves in different settings. These facets are often referred to as identities. Identity has been conceptualized as the tension between how a person identifies herself as an individual and how she associates with others in affiliative relationships (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Schau and Gilly 2003). Individual identity has been studied in the psychology literature as self concept, conceptualized as the perception one has of herself and the sum of all unique characteristics she possesses (Sirgy 1982). In contrast, affiliative identities have been emphasized in sociological literature and refer to the roles that one assumes while interacting with differing audiences (Belk 1988; Goffman 1959; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). James (1925) suggests that we have as many different social selves as we do distinct groups of individuals we interact with. Social identities are used to guide our interactions with others and

assist in determining the salient personality characteristics that are acceptable for a given situation.

Self presentation is an integral component of oneself used to display a public identity to others (Baumeister 1982; Goffman 1959). Personality characteristics remain stable over time, though an audience often influences the choice of characteristics manifested. When interacting with others, individuals engage in complex intraself negotiations to select an appropriate role to play for a given audience. These various roles do not exist in a vacuum; individuals are capable of playing multiple roles simultaneously (e.g. Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003). However, some roles can explicitly conflict with one another such that meeting the core expectations of one role will require falling short of the core expectations of another role (e.g. Heide and Wathne 2006; Price and Arnould 1999).

Users often carefully select pictures and comments to be shared online in order to cast the user in a particular light. In general, users desire to portray an idealized self image to the audience, while avoiding or minimizing topics that may be considered sensitive to an audience that holds different opinions. Identity salience is an important part of understanding how individuals negotiate role conflict. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) suggest that while individuals enact multiple identities, all identities are not of equal importance. Identities are placed in a hierarchical order, such that when role conflict emerges, the more important identity will guide selection of the role. Individuals may also use various coping strategies to present distinct identities to different groups, and when “role and audience segregation is well managed, [the individual] can quite handily sustain different selves” (Goffman 1963; p. 63).

In a social networking context, enacting the appropriate identity can prove much more challenging. As a user’s network size and relationship diversity increases, the ability to minimize

undesirable qualities while simultaneously emphasizing desirable (and possibly contradictory) qualities becomes quite daunting. Because the audience is primarily limited to individuals with whom the user also maintains an offline relationship, the user is much more sensitive to the audience's opinion of items that are shared within the social space. With the greater risk, users are much more likely to self regulate the behaviors and thoughts shared with their social network community.

The personal nature of social networks suggests that users are much more scrutinizing of interactions with other users as well as companies in the online space. While users may allow other users and firms to connect with them in the social network space, the user regularly evaluates the value derived from maintaining a relationship in this personal space. Both firms and "Friends" must demonstrate ongoing value to remain in a user's social network. Friends may be removed for sharing inappropriate or offensive comments and pictures. While such behaviors are unlikely from a reputable firm, branded messaging that is off-base, intrusive, or too frequent can also result in the user removing the brand Fan page from her digital network.

### **THE MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE**

Firms have traditionally placed media management into silos, with responsibilities distributed to various departments. Paid media encompasses distinct purchased media such as TV, radio, and print and are typically handled by the creative department or advertising agency. Owned media came about with the internet and includes properties such as the company website and search engine optimization; these media are often managed by the information technology group or the marketing department. Finally, earned media such as public relations and press coverage are almost always assigned to the public relations department. Though these media are often handled in different departments, from the consumer's perspective, they work collectively

to create an overall brand image. Prior to social media, employees have been able to distinguish their role within the overall communications picture and effectively integrate their piece of the puzzle. However, the evolution of social media has blurred the lines between paid, owned, and earned media, and it has lessened control over the message for all departments within the organization. Maintaining a company image in social channels creates a unique set of challenges in determining how to manage the paid, owned, and earned media simultaneously.

The viral nature of social media offers a great opportunity to brand managers who wish to gain positive traction online through word of mouth; unfortunately for brand managers, this same word of mouth can be detrimental to the brand image when consumers feel they have been mistreated. The perils of customer service missteps are frequently shared on the evening news and passed around in social media channels. For example, Dave Carroll's United Breaks Guitars video went viral on YouTube, making the fledgling singer an overnight sensation while simultaneously vilifying United Airlines, who refused to pay for damage they caused to his guitar (Bernoff and Chadler 2010). While this example illustrates the power of word of mouth in a social media context, it has also led brand managers to question how to protect a brand's reputation when a single negative experience for the brand can become an overnight viral sensation with consumers. An early stance taken by some brand managers was to avoid a brand presence on social media altogether—suggesting that if customers do not have a place to vent online, it simply won't happen (Ramsay 2010). However, as social media continues to dominate consumer conversations and pop culture, many brand managers are recognizing the fallacy of such a naïve approach and are now seeking ways to accentuate their brand's position in social channels while minimizing negative sentiment from consumers in social media platforms. As brand managers strive to maintain a cohesive presence and protect the brand, they must manage a

delicate balance of protecting the brand image while also facilitating new customer touch points and encouraging deeper connections between the consumer and the brand.

A firm's audience is likely to differ across platforms, as well as within the same platform—based on the activities and goals of the consumer. Thus, managers should consider utilizing a number of social channels to build relationships. One such channel that offers a tremendously loyal, engaged user base is that of social network games. Some marketers are embracing social network games as an alternative advertising venue, developing innovative online marketing communications campaigns for the niche social gamer segment. Advertising in social network games is an enticing alternative to interact with social network users as this venue offers brand managers access to players who may otherwise be inaccessible via traditional social networking; some players belong to a social network merely for the gaming experience, and do not use the social network for any other purpose.

The online, social component of social network games offers benefits that are unmatched in other social media platforms. Prior research has found that unobtrusive brand messaging adds realism to the story line (Gupta and Gould 1997; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004; Ong and Meri 1994). Firms that participate in product placements benefit from the halo effect of positive emotions resulting from interactions with an entertainment source; these positive emotions are often transferred to the brand, especially if the brand is a central component of the story line (Glass, 2007; Nelson and Waiguny 2012; Redondo 2009). Finally, product placements that are congruent with the story line may avoid counter arguments from the player, thereby increasing both believability and persuasivity (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006). Gamers regularly express concerns that a brand's involvement must align with the overall gaming experience (Chambers 2005), or risk game and/or brand boycotts

(Nelson 2005). Players are willing to engage with brands in a gaming context, though the player benefits should be a central component of the campaign offering. Thus, brand managers considering such venues must first understand the underlying motivations of players in order to develop a marketing communications campaign that is well aligned with the goals of the players.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To investigate how social networks are shaping the culture and the consumer psyche, the author employed a variety of qualitative and interpretive methods over a two year research period. To gain a perspective of action (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), we utilized a combination of in-depth interviews, focus groups with journaling techniques, and content analysis in order to triangulate and refine themes related to each research endeavor (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Multiple methods were employed in order to increase reliability and validity of the findings (Goetz and LeCompte 1984; LeCompte and Goetz 1982; Wolcott 1994).

*Interviews.* In-depth interviews were conducted with a heavy usage segment of Facebook participants—social network gamers—in order to better understand the concerns and perceptions of social network users. The interviewer followed a semi-structured guide, beginning with questions related to self-presentation and then proceeding to discussions of the participant's views with regard to brand promotions in social network games. Interviews were informal in nature and characterized by a conversational quality in which the discussions were largely driven by the participants. As participant narratives revealed examples relevant to the study, the author probed further to gain a better understanding of the underlying concerns.

A separate interview study sought to understand social media strategy from a managerial perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with managers representing both the supplier and agency perspective. Interviews were semi-structured, enabling follow-up questions that

probed instances of interesting or unique experiences related to managing a brand in social channels. This allowed the author to gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges involved in creating an engaging social media communications strategy from a managerial perspective. The primary goals of the managerial interviews were to identify social media platforms utilized by the participant's firm, understand the structure of the department where social media strategy is developed, investigate the goals and objectives for the different types of social media, and understand the participant's view of the future of social media.

*Focus Groups.* Focus groups were conducted to further refine and compare the self-presentational concerns of a heavy user segment of Facebook users (gamers) to a more professional segment—K-12 teachers. While the professional user segment may not be considered a heavy user, impression management concerns of this group are heightened due to popular press reports illustrating members of this user group who have been terminated for pictures and comments shared within social media. Thus, the importance of proper self-presentation in social media is likely to be a very salient concern for K-12 teacher, allowing for an interesting contrast to the social gamer group. Focus groups were utilized as a means to better understand self-presentational concerns in a group setting, following Wooten and Reed's (2002) suggestion that this particular methodology is advantageous in identifying the most prominent self-presentational concerns. Participants were encouraged to gather thoughts at the beginning of each discussion topic by writing notes in a journal that was later collected. Saegert, Fractor, and Mandell (1980) found that allowing participants the opportunity to respond privately to sensitive topics garnered more honest responses to the questions; journaled comments that weren't discussed in the focus group setting were discussed privately during follow-up individual interviews. During the focus groups, participants were asked to participate in a number of short



activities designed to better understand the participants' views of their personal use of Facebook, rules of thumb they use to manage their self-presentation, and the types of relationships (with both consumers and brands) that exist in their personal social network.

*Content Analysis.* A content analysis was conducted to further examine player receptiveness to branded promotions in social network games. A message board consisting of more than 2 million members who play Zynga social network games was identified, and a combination of marketing-related key words (e.g. brand, promotion) and known prior promotions (e.g. 7-Eleven, Stouffer's) were then used to identify message threads directly related to Farmville promotions during the time frame of September 2009 to July 2012. Message threads that met these initial criteria were downloaded into a document for further sorting and assessment. During the analysis phase, the author utilized themes derived from earlier interviews to guide the message categorization process. In order to strengthen reliability of the findings (Perrault and Leigh 1989), two independent coders were employed to also code a portion of the downloaded comments. Each coder's categorizations were compared with the author's to reveal concordance, resulting in a high degree of inter-rater reliability.

## **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH STUDIES**

Chapter two examines the self-presentational concerns of consumers in social networks. Prior social network research has emphasized the value of social networks in bringing users together to develop and enhance friendships in a digital space. Chapter two seeks to explore the tools that users employ to craft a desired image of the self in a social network. I utilize a triangulation approach of 18 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with two distinct audiences—social network games and K-12 teachers. Social network gamers exemplify a heavy user segment of social network users, often spending more than an hour per day on the social

network; K-12 teachers represent a group of social network users who are highly cognizant of the perils of poor impression management in social networks. Findings suggest similar impression management techniques across both audiences. The author identifies three primary motivations underlying the desire to protect the ego: a need for respect, a need to feel secure, and a need for acceptance. To manage these motivations, social network users employ both self-protecting and self-enhancing strategies. A number of self-regulation techniques are also explicated for each strategy.

Chapter three develops an advertising communications typology specific to the social network game genre. This research endeavor proposes a typology of social network game-based promotion effectiveness. Building upon the MDA framework from the gaming literature (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck 2004), the author proposes a new F-A typology framework that examines promotions in the context of two axes: functional congruency (in game versus out of game) and aesthetic congruency (promotional offering aligns with players' motivations for playing the game versus a promotional offering that does not align with player motivations for playing the game). Eighteen in-depth interviews with current and previous Farmville gamers are used to further refine the F-A typology. A second study encompassing 3,086 message board posts related to four branded promotions within Farmville were also examined in order to further substantiate the typology. Additional functional congruency issues related to game-based promotions were also uncovered in the second study.

Chapter four examines social media strategy from a managerial perspective. Although social media has become a source of interaction between consumers and their favorite brands, surprisingly little academic research has sought to understand how brand managers incorporate social media into the overarching marketing communications strategy. In Chapter 4, I conduct

case studies with both managers and agency personnel responsible for making social media decisions, in order to understand how social media is incorporated into their firms' marketing communications strategies. Six in-depth interviews inform the agenda, their interpretations guided by participants' wealth of experience in digital communications. Findings offer preliminary insights into the ways in which brand managers position social media within the firm and utilize social media as a tool to better understand and address customer needs.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Self in a Digital Age: Protecting and Enhancing the Ego Through Self-Presentational Regulation<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Killian, Ginger, Candice Hollenbeck, and John Hulland. To be submitted to *Journal of Consumer Behavior*.

## **ABSTRACT**

Prior social network research has emphasized the value of social networks in bringing users together to develop and enhance friendships in a digital space. The present research seeks to explore the tools that users employ to craft a desired image of the self in a social network. I utilize a triangulation approach of 18 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with two distinct audiences—social network games and K-12 teachers. Social network gamers exemplify a heavy user segment of social network users, often spending more than an hour per day on the social network; K-12 teachers represent a group of social network users who are highly cognizant of the perils of poor impression management in social networks. Findings suggest similar impression management techniques across both audiences. The author identifies three primary motivations underlying the desire to protect the ego: a need for respect, a need to feel secure, and a need for acceptance. To manage these motivations, social network users employ both self-protecting and self-enhancing strategies. A number of self-regulation techniques are also explicated for each strategy.

“Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune.”  
— C.G. Jung

## INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of social networking sites, the self is continually on display and popular platforms like Facebook evoke a constant self-monitoring among users. This preoccupation with how the self is presented to others is the focus of our study. We situate our study within the context of Facebook, as it is the largest social networking site with world-wide usage at more than one billion monthly active users (Facebook 2012). Research shows at least 75% of adults who use the Internet are using social media (Stephen and Galak 2010; Urstadt 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, attract more than 90% of young adults and teens and represent over a quarter of all internet traffic (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). This growth in social networking has led to a heightened sense of self-presentation evaluation as social networking allows for a carefully-crafted, critically-evaluated self.

Research suggests the self has multiple dimensions (Rosenberg 1979) and according to Sirgy (1982) there are three main distinctions: the actual self, the ideal self and the social self. The actual self is how a person perceives herself; the ideal self is how a person would like to perceive herself; and, the social self refers to how a person presents herself to others. In this paper we focus on the latter, giving attention to the social self. The ubiquitous nature of social networking sites allows individuals to self-present to audiences incessantly and this creates an opportunity for researchers to investigate how users maintain their egos via self-regulation. Social media fosters a context where every comment, photograph, or shared artifact is evaluated by others and such social platforms offer a personal reflection of the ideals and character that

make up the individual. Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) find that an individual's behavior is directed by the desire to protect and enhance the self. Moreover, an individual's motivations to protect versus promote her ego can directly influence the type of self-regulation employed to accomplish the goal (Higgins 2002).

Research has shown that self-regulation is a critical component of self presentation, in that one must select the appropriate image and then convey it in a given context (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005). Successful self regulation allows individuals to maintain ego balance through positive reinforcement of behaviors well accepted by others while obfuscating behaviors that may be less desirable. Although social networking sites like Facebook were created using an others-centric model premised upon the notion of building and maintaining relationships (Wohn et al. 2011), recent research shows that social networking sites more closely resemble an ego-centric model that bolsters the self (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). Simply put, the ego-centric model says "Look at me. Look up to me" whereas the others-centric model says "Look at her. Look at him. Let's be friends." This is an interesting contrast as we begin to see the focus of social networking usage shift from connecting with others to presenting a desired social self.

The present research examines the ego as a narrative identity process evinced in social networking sites. The ego is a reflexive mental construct (Maccannell 2002). According to Freud and Lacan, the ego is part of one's identity and its singular drive is to keep itself whole; consequently, the ego's greatest fear is dismemberment or dissolution (Lacan 1988). When the ego is threatened, its imbalance is what gives meaning to anti-social behaviors such as paranoia, envy, or greed. In fact, people engage in self-regulated thinking almost constantly, even when

they are not dealing with a situation or problem for which self-relevant thought is needed (Leary and Tangney 2011).

The purpose of this research is to extend our knowledge of the self concept by examining ego maintenance as a form of conspicuous self-presentation, where every element is chosen for its symbolic potential. Our research is guided by three overarching research questions: 1) Are social network users experiencing ego maintenance concerns?, 2) What strategies do users employ to maintain the ego?, and 3) How do such behaviors affect the user's social self concept? Our findings show that reliance on an idealized social self and attention to social norms increases as individuals attempt to manage the collision of offline and online selves. Moreover, individuals become progressively more focused on the image that is on display as their audience and interests change over time. Using phenomenological research methods, we illustrate that users employ two primary strategies in maintaining ego balance: self-promotion and self-protection. Motivations that underpin ego maintenance concerns include: the need to be respected, the need to feel secure, and the need to be accepted. To manage these concerns, social network users employ a number of self-promoting and self-protecting strategies.

In the following sections, we review the literature on social networks, self presentation, and impression management. Then, we discuss our method which uses the tenants of existential-phenomenology (for full review see Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The goal of our phenomenological interviews is to attain a first-person description of the decision processes that inform self-presentation choices. In addition, we glean insights from focus groups to understand social influences and social norms that guide presentation of the self. Next, we present our findings in light of the literature and discuss our insights in terms of societal and cultural



implications. We conclude with a summary of managerial implications and future research directions.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

Because social media are often a large part of one's daily life, the content and makeup of social networks are in a constant state of flux. A user's network changes may include a status update or thoughts related to current news events; network membership changes including addition or deletion of members; and other network members' comments, pictures, and activities. Each of these changes can lead a user to critically evaluate the image they display to others and carefully refine an image that will meet her audience expectations.

Self regulation literature has been conceptualized as one's ability to alter the self's responses in order to attain an end goal (Baumeister and Vohs 2007; Heatherton and Baumeister 1996; Higgins 1997; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005). Through self-regulation, a user carefully constructs an image that balances the expectations of the many audience members simultaneously in order to successfully meet their expectations. In a social network context, users self regulate to craft an image by sharing desirable pieces of information (i.e. announcement of a job promotion) while withholding other, less desirable information (i.e. unflattering pictures) (Berg and Derlega 1987; Kelly and McKillop 1996). The crafting of self presentation is used to regulate one's self-esteem in two ways. Reinforcing behaviors, such as compliments, Likes, and praise from the viewing audience serve to bolster the ego. In contrast, users may feel they fail to achieve their audience's expectations when such gestures are not received or shared items are met with criticism, thus unbalancing the ego (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006). The instantaneous feedback system within a social network results in users frequently monitoring and modifying the image they portray to

their network in order to maintain ego balance. In the following sections, we review the social landscape, self presentation in social media, and impression management.

### **The Social Landscape**

Social networks have developed as a venue to connect a user with others in a virtual space and allow the user to display her essence through pictures, comments, activities, and associations (Schau and Gilly 2003; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). Digital platforms allow individuals to continuously self-present to others without the temporal and geographical limitations of the non-digital world (Schau and Gilly 2003). The earliest form of online self projection, personal websites and blogs, are widely used to provide a ‘slice of life’ to audiences who find interest in the author’s perspective. Because the audience isn’t necessarily known to the author, the author may enjoy a sense of anonymity and share activities or stories without the concern of disappointing those who know her in real life. In this context, self regulation plays a lesser role, because individuals are less concerned with social desirability when the individual does not interact with the audience in real life (Moon 2000).

In contrast, social networks are designed to be a digital extension of one’s real life activities and access to one’s social network must be granted by the user. While an individual may emphasize a certain aspect of her life within a social network, the functionality of a social network is such that the user shares a much more comprehensive image and is able to receive immediate feedback from the audience. Because the audience is primarily comprised of individuals with whom the user also maintains an offline relationship, the ego is much more sensitive to the audience’s opinions of items that are shared within the social space. With the greater risk, users are much more likely to self-regulate the behaviors and thoughts shared with her community.

A social network site is characterized as a web-based service that allows users to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile, (2) specify a list of users with whom they share a connection, and (3) consume and produce user generated content (Boyd and Ellison 2008; Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). At the core of a social network site is a user profile, where users are able to build online biographies to represent themselves in a digital world. Users grant permission to one another to connect in the social space, thereby authorizing one another to view information that is not publicly available to others. Accepting a connection request can result in feelings of acceptance and belonging, whereas feelings of rejection and exclusion can occur when an extended friend request is either denied or ignored. The final characteristic of a social network is its impetus: user generated content. A social network user can consume content that is produced by others as well as produce and share content with others in her network (Trusov, Bodapati, and Bucklin 2010). Users often carefully select items for display in order to cast themselves in a particular light so as to portray a desired image to the audience, while avoiding or minimizing topics that may be considered controversial to an audience that holds different opinions. As an example, politically motivated messages may be met with comments of agreement or support from one party while also being viewed as inflammatory by the other. Though some users may not see an issue with discussing controversial positions in an open forum such as a social network, other users find controversy to be unsettling, and thus altogether avoid discussing issues that divide the audience.

There are dozens of social networking platforms, some of which are specialized and highly restrictive while others are less restrictive and flexible for their users. As an example, LinkedIn is a specialized professional social network touting 150 million unique monthly visitors. LinkedIn is primarily used as a tool to develop a professional network, make career-

relevant connections, and display online referrals (eBiz.com 2011). LinkedIn users find value in promoting themselves online as well as seeking future employment and/or professional connections to advance their careers.

Another popular social network site, Facebook, boasts more than one billion unique monthly visitors, and is considered the largest leisure social network (Facebook 2012). Leisure sites such as Facebook were initially designed to keep close friends and family in touch and provide a way to share their lives online. However, the site has evolved into an extensive online platform where individuals connect with known and unknown others who share at least one similar interest. Facebook has permeated society in such a way that users often visit the social network multiple times per day by computer and/or mobile device. In many cases, users share major events through the social network instead of contacting people individually. When a user's status update garners a considerable number of Likes or comments, real time Facebook algorithms identify the post to be noteworthy, elevating the post to the top of the user's News Feed. Thus, there is a rewarding facet to creating a post that generates considerable interaction among audience members.

Research shows that an important motivation for engaging in social networking sites is self-construal and that culture plays a significant role in influencing the communication of psychological attributes, individuating information, and the quantity of self-descriptive expression (DeAndrea, Shaw, and Levine 2010; Jang Hyun, Min-Sun, and Yoonjae 2010). In addition, users are utilizing social networks to initiate, maintain or enhance existing offline relationships, though the vast majority of relationships in a social network exist in an offline capacity (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Hudiburgh 2012; Wohn et al. 2011). Further, the focus of social network usage is primarily on self expression with greater attention given to presenting

the ideal self (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). Although some studies in psychology indicate that the use of Facebook can enhance social situations for those with low self-esteem by helping them develop a larger network of friends that would otherwise be unattainable for the introverted personality type (Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe 2008; Zywica and Danowski 2008), other studies show that social networking sites like Facebook are having an increasingly negative impact on overall self-esteem (Acar 2008).

While some users may participate in a social network to enrich offline relationships, others use social networks to learn something new, build relationships with brands, and/or otherwise be entertained (McCann 2010). The types of social network activities available for users to engage in are extensive, and the value of social networks derived by consumers is equally as diverse. As a user develops more social network interests, she is likely to extend Friend designations to a growing number of distinct communities of individuals with whom she shares a common interest.

### **Self-Presentation and the Social Self**

Members of an individual's social network may be affiliated with substantively different groups, including family, high school friends, college fraternity members, business associates, church members, and even fellow hobby enthusiasts. Prior research by Kozinets et al. (2010) suggests that a user's credibility is lost when an individual does not remain true to her values. And while one's core values may remain stable across relationships, these values may be emphasized differently depending on the context of the relationship. Effective self regulation allows individuals to integrate into a group by emphasizing the characteristics that are relevant to the role the individual plays in the group. As an example, consider a woman who attends her employer's holiday party. As she enters the party atmosphere, she may feel less professional than

if she were in the office, though she would not engage with co-workers in the same manner that she may engage with close friends during a holiday gathering; she is more reserved, understanding that a misstep at the company holiday party could have considerably different repercussions than a misstep where friends are the only present audience.

Social networking sites have the ability to bring vastly different groups of individuals together, which can create internal conflict in attempting to satisfy the very different expectations of various groups simultaneously (Biddle 1986). Goffman (1963; p. 138) suggests that such “discrepancies between virtual and actual identity ... give rise to the need for tension management ... and information control.” As such, individuals tend to present different facets of themselves in different settings. These facets are often referred to as identities (Goffman 1959).

Identity has been conceptualized as the tension between how a person identifies herself as an individual and how she associates with others in affiliative relationships (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Schau and Gilly 2003). Individual identity has been studied in the psychology literature as self concept, conceptualized as the perception one has of herself and the sum of all unique characteristics she possesses (Sirgy 1982). In contrast, affiliative identities have been emphasized in sociological literature and refer to the roles that one assumes while interacting with differing audiences (Belk 1988; Goffman 1959; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). James (1925) suggests that we have as many different social selves as we do distinct groups of individuals we interact with. Social identities are used to guide our interactions with others and assist in determining the salient personality characteristics that are acceptable for a given situation.

Self presentation is an integral component of oneself used to display a public identity to others (Baumeister 1982; Goffman 1959). Personality characteristics remain stable over time,

though an audience often influences the choice of characteristics manifested. When interacting with others, individuals engage in complex intraself negotiations to select an appropriate role to play for a given audience. These various roles do not exist in a vacuum; individuals are capable of playing multiple roles simultaneously (e.g. Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003). However, some roles can explicitly conflict with one another such that meeting the core expectations of one role will require falling short of the core expectations of another role (e.g. Heide and Wathne 2006; Price and Arnould 1999). For example, to be a dedicated employee may require one to remain at work later than normal working hours, though this may distinctly conflict with being a dedicated and dependable parent.

Identity salience is an important part of understanding how individuals negotiate role conflict. Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) suggest that while individuals enact multiple identities, all identities are not of equal importance. Identities are placed in a hierarchical order, such that when role conflict emerges, the more important identity will guide selection of the role. Individuals may also use various self-regulating strategies to present distinct identities to different groups, and when “role and audience segregation is well managed, [the individual] can quite handily sustain different selves” (Goffman 1963; p. 63).

In a social networking context, enacting the appropriate identity can prove much more challenging. As a user’s network size and relationship diversity increases, the ability to minimize undesirable qualities while simultaneously emphasizing desirable (and possibly contradictory) qualities becomes quite daunting. The present research seeks to understand the types of self regulating behaviors employed by users in order to manage various roles simultaneously in a single online platform.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To investigate how social networks are shaping the culture<sup>2</sup> and the consumer psyche, we employed a variety of qualitative and interpretive methods over a two year research period. To gain a perspective of action (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), we utilized a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups with journaling techniques in order to triangulate and refine themes between two contexts of social network users (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the first phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with a heavy usage segment of Facebook participants—social network gamers. To confirm and refine the conceptualization from phase one, the second phase consisted of two focus groups of K-12 teachers—a segment whose impression management concerns are heightened due to popular press reports. Following the description of each study, we discuss the analytical process undertaken in order to develop themes related to impression management concerns as well as the solutions employed to alleviate these concerns.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

In the first phase, we investigated heavy users of Facebook in order to better understand the types of stress that social media users may experience. Using in-depth interviews, we garnered a deep understanding of the types of stresses that heavy social network users encounter, the nature of their interactions with others on social networks, and the importance of social network usage to their overall identity. Social network gamers often spend more than an hour per day playing games within the context of Facebook, and the network membership of this particular user segment often includes both known and unknown individuals (Wohn et al. 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> Social media is shaping culture in that individuals are now overtly concerned with how pictures or written comments reflect on them as an individual. Prior to social media, the consequences of activities and/or audience judgments associated with activities such as drinking a glass of wine at dinner were not critically evaluated for the social repercussions that could result if the wrong audience viewed the activity.



With the growing use of games in social networking sites, this is an appropriate context within which to study the online personas individuals display to others.

Eighteen in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with social network gamers. Interviews were initially solicited by posting a request to the Wall of the first author's Facebook account. Many friends of the author also posted a solicitation for participation to their social network Walls. Though a portion of the participants were previously associated with the first author through Farmville, 47% of participants had no prior interaction. The participants were male and female with a mean age of 42. Participants were geographically dispersed, with a majority from the United States. Table 2.1 provides a brief description of participants' backgrounds. The interviewer followed a semi-structured guide, beginning with questions related to self presentation and then proceeding to discussions of strategies used by the participants to maintain, restore, or bolster the ego. Interviews were informal in nature and characterized by a conversational quality in which the discussions were largely driven by the participants. As participant narratives revealed self-presentational examples, the authors probed further to gain a better understanding of the underlying concerns.

### **Focus Groups**

In the second phase, focus group sessions served as a means for further substantiation (and possible refinement) of the Phase 1 findings with a professional, adult population: K-12 school teachers. Wooten and Reed (2002) suggest that focus groups are beneficial in exploration of topics related to self presentational concerns, and this particular methodology is advantageous in identifying the most prominent self-presentational concerns. While the professional user segment may not be considered a heavy user, this segment has much more at stake if the wrong impression is created. Thus, the importance of proper self-presentation in social media is likely

to be a highly salient concern for this group, allowing for an interesting potential contrast to the social gamer group.

The focus group design was selected in order to model the social aspects of an online social network, with a primary goal of better understanding the types of information that is willingly shared with a known group of friends. The journaling task allowed the author to compare to the individual's private thoughts with those that were shared in the context of the focus group. Each focus group consisted of a homogenous group of teachers who were known to each other, work together, and were connected in Facebook. Focus group participants were selected by locating a single willing participant and asking that she solicit participation from a number of her close teacher friends. In utilizing participants who engage regularly offline, conversation was able to flow more freely (Wooten and Reed 2000). Because the group members knew each other well, the group was able to relate to one another and dialogue was conversational (Fern 1983; Greenbaum 1998; Wooten and Reed 2000). Prior scholars have found that interactions between a group of known individuals is less likely to result in social anxiety, thereby reducing the likelihood that the study context would exacerbate more protective rather than promoting type behaviors (Arkin, 1981; Arkin, Lake, and Baumgardner 1986). Group sizes were restricted to 5-6 participants in order to minimize concerns related to self-presentation anxiety (Corfman 1995; Wooten and Reed 2000). A brief summary of the relevant characteristics of each focus group participant is included in Table 2.2.

Both focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes. During the focus groups, participants were asked to participate in a number of short activities designed to better understand the participants' views of their personal use of Facebook, rules of thumb used to manage their online self presentation, and the types of relationships (with both consumers and

brands) that exist in their personal social network. Participants were encouraged to gather thoughts at the beginning of each topic by writing notes in a journal that was later collected. The journaling tasks allowed for more personal and meaningful insights during discussion by allowing participants a moment to individually identify the issues they face with relation to their impression management in Facebook before sharing their thoughts with others. Users were also able to further elaborate on why and how they use coping strategies to maintain their ego through self-presentation strategies. Participants were asked to be open about their thoughts in writing in the journal. During the discussion portion of the focus group, participants were asked to volunteer thoughts related to the subject, but no participant was required to share their personal thoughts. Saegert, Fractor, and Mandell (1980) found that allowing participants the opportunity to respond privately to sensitive topics garnered more honest responses to the questions. Following the focus group session, the authors followed up individually with participants in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the participants' journaled thoughts. Particular care was taken during personal interviews to understand the items that were journaled but not discussed within the focus group session.

### **Analysis**

Our analysis of verbatim interview and focus group transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole strategy in which we aimed at developing a holistic understanding of the user's experience on social networking sites (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Aided by Atlas.ti software, we used prior theories to guide our analysis of the interviews and focus groups. In essence, each phase served as a means for further developing our thematic categories, allowing the researchers to identify a holistic relationship among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their behaviors. We began by developing codes for emergent themes, which

later merged into broader, more general categories of information (Spiggle 1994). Throughout the data reduction process, we continued to examine existing categories in light of new data. The analysis was hermeneutic and iterative, and evolved using a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Following Burawoy's (1991) suggestion to utilize existing bodies of literature in search of theories to explain behavior, the data analysis process involved an iterative analysis between the data and existing theorization on impression management, self-regulation, and the ego.

## **FINDINGS**

We begin this section by introducing the underlying motivations for self-presentation. Those who utilize social networks for pleasure seeking behaviors, such as playing games, share a self-presentation motivation that is markedly different from users who are primarily concerned with their impression management for professional reasons. However, the types of concerns encountered as well as the various self-regulation techniques employed were similar across both participant groups—gamers and professionals.

Following the discussion of impression management motivations, we place the findings into a framework comprised of three categories. In the first category, we identify the motivations that participants identified in relation to managing their online self-presentation. Following examination of these concerns, we discuss the self-regulation mechanisms that participants utilize to maintain ego balance. Protecting the ego by maintaining or raising self esteem is widely regarded as a fundamental goal that guides social behavior (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1993; Mehdizadeh 2010). Hence, users in a social network are continually evaluating the facets of themselves they share as well as how the audience responds to the user's posts; greater (or positive) responses generate feelings of acceptance and belonging whereas an absence of (or

negative) responses can lead to feelings of rejection and isolation. In order to guard against negative effects, social network users employ two categories of self-regulation behaviors: self-promotion and self-protection. As suspected, our results uncovered a greater use of ego-protecting behaviors as compared to ego-promoting behaviors, illustrative of the importance of guarding oneself against ego threats from others in the network. Our findings first review the promotional strategies employed by users, followed by an exploration of the protective strategies utilized to maintain ego balance.

### **Motivational Differences between Studies**

***Social Network Gamers.*** A common goal of social gamers is to be viewed by others as a good citizen of the gaming community. Social gamers seek to fulfill this need by responding to community requests for game help or sharing items that are needed for others to progress within the game. Sharing items is facilitated by posting a game-generated message to the individual's own social network Wall. Doing so allows other connected users to see the item via the Facebook News Feed and click on the game related post if interested. The sharing behavior that qualifies a gamer as a good citizen of the game community can simultaneously result in the gamer being viewed as a poor member in a non-gamer's social network as the result of sharing a high volume of unwanted or irrelevant items; the sheer volume of game related posts can obscure non-game related postings that may be of interest to other social network users. Attempting to strike a balance between the expectations of both the gamer and non-gamer communities can create a sense of tension in determining how to fulfill the expectations of both communities simultaneously. Maggie describes her concerns:

I have a couple of judgmental friends. I'll see their post in the [Facebook] News Feed about how much they hate seeing all of the game posts. People who don't play think it's fine to vent on Facebook about the game posts, even though they post about every single thing they do. I don't post about how much I hate seeing their update every time their dog

goes outside. Still, I try to monitor how much I post so I don't annoy my friends that don't play games. (Maggie, 30, Gamer)

Because game-based postings appear in all network connections' News Feed, gamers feel a sense of responsibility to tailor their posting behavior to both the gaming and non-gaming community. On average, social network users may post one or two status updates per day. In contrast, game-related postings can be in excess of 30 posts per gaming session, depending upon the activities completed within the game. As James explains, gamers often try to limit postings to those that are most important in order to reduce the frustrations felt by their non-gamer friends:

I have a lot of friends that don't play games, and they give me a hard time, you know, razzing me about my game playing. So, I try to monitor how many [Facebook] posts I share at any one time. I don't want to annoy them, but I also feel a responsibility to help out my gaming friends. I try to walk a fine line to make everyone happy. (James, 36, Gamer)

Gamers are attracted to the premise of playing in a social network context. This genre of game offers an opportunity to escape the demands of real life through play with friends, family, and others that may not be easily accessible on a daily basis. However, scrutiny or derogatory comments from non-gamers can dilute the gamer's level of enjoyment by exacerbating the gamer's frustration in trying to satisfy expectations of competing audiences simultaneously.

***Professionals.*** This group is also highly cognizant of the risks associated with self-presentation in a social network. As a professional segment with high visibility in the community, K-12 teachers are particularly concerned with the image they project online. Popular press has reported stories about teachers who have been admonished or fired due to activities, comments, or pictures posted in a social network—even when these postings were deemed private and the activities were conducted during non-working hours (Downey 2010; Lim 2012; Protalinski 2012; Swanson 2010). Participants discussed similar pressures related to teachers and how they are often held to a higher standard as a role model for children; thus, this participant

segment felt scrutinized for activities conducted both inside and outside the classroom. Deana describes her concerns:

I'm careful about what I post on Facebook, but sometimes family or friends aren't as cautious. The last thing I want is to lose my job because someone tagged me in a picture where I was drinking a glass of champagne at a wedding, and my administration saw it before I was able to untag myself. I make sure my Facebook security settings are locked down to the tightest settings to make sure that only those people I approve of can see what's on my page. But, you never know who can see what. Facebook privacy settings change way too much for me to trust that my information is actually private. So, I always make sure that I'm not in any picture where alcohol is present. I won't even let a picture be taken of me if I'm holding a Solo cup—because people may speculate about what's inside. (Deana, 42, Professional)

Participants conveyed that they are careful with the information and image they choose to share online, emphasizing that there is simply too much at stake if the wrong image is projected. The pervasive use of social media is not only shaping what users share online, it is also influencing users' offline behaviors. Though the underlying motivation for self presentational concerns varies between the two groups, it is important to note that both participant categories grapple with the same presentational concerns. In both study contexts, participants expressed a desire to present themselves in the best possible light to their audiences, both online and offline.

### **Proposed Conceptual Framework**

Three primary goals were identified by participants with regard to managing self presentation in a social network environment: the need to be respected, the need to feel secure, and the need for acceptance. These goals lead users to self-regulate through promotion-focused and prevention-focused behaviors. According to Higgins (2002), promotion-focused behaviors are focused on the presence or absence of positive outcomes, advancement, aspirations, and accomplishments. In contrast, prevention-focused behaviors are focused on absence or presence of negative outcomes, and often manifest as concerns regarding safety, protection, and responsibility. It's important to note that users are both capable and likely to utilize both

prevention-focused and promotion-focused behaviors in tandem. Within each self regulation process, the various strategies employed to present a cohesive self to the audience are discussed. Figure 2.1 summarizes our proposed conceptual framework.

### **Ego Maintenance**

Skeels and Grudin's (2009) study reveals that individuals are concerned with how information shared in a social network can influence or affect workplace success and happiness, a finding that our study also replicates. However, our study extends our understanding related to the various ego maintenance tensions experienced (both work and non-work related), and the associated motivations. Users aim to balance three ego-maintaining motivations in a social network context: the need to be respected, the need to feel secure, and the need to be accepted. The following section will further discuss these concepts.

***The Need to be Respected: Personal and Professional Roles.*** Though Facebook is primarily designed as a leisure site, the benefits of such a popular network include being able to interact with different types of relationships through a single platform. Of the many types of relationships that one encounters in daily life, two—those of family origin and those of work affiliation—often result in incompatible role demands. Work-family role conflict has long been the subject of research (see Amstad et al. 2011 for recent meta-analysis), and results have shown that conflict between personal and professional roles can result in psychological strain, depression, and health problems. For this reason, many users feel that it is important to maintain separation of these two roles as much as possible, resulting in emphasis of different character traits at home versus at the office. However, among the various roles one may play, there is an underlying motivation to be respected in each given role.



Social networking sites such as Facebook have blurred the lines between roles inasmuch as individuals often develop friendships that may cross boundaries that were once separated by physical space and time. For example, an overlap of friend and colleague status inside a social network can result in strained relations if information shared in a social network intended for “friends” results in a network member invoking the role of “colleague”. Teachers are often employed in the same community in which they live. The proximity of work and life may result in a professional (e.g., teacher) having a personal relationship with her clients (e.g., parents). When the context of personal and professional relationships overlap, it can lead to discomfort and a loss of respect for both parties. Amelia shared her experience with a parent, whose daughter is presently a student in her class:

My daughter was a student [at the school] long before I came on staff. So, I was friends with some of my daughter’s friends’ parents. Now that I’m a teacher, I have some of my daughter’s friends in my class. And I catch myself as I’m about to ask about something I read on Facebook. It may be something as innocent as, “How were the marshmallows at the bonfire Friday night?” And I think, ‘oh, wait. I know that because her mom said something, not because she did.’ So, I don’t ask. But Facebook allows you to know a lot about a person, and sometimes that’s not the best idea when they are a student in your class. (Amelia, 48, Professional)

Our participants often make an exception to the “No parents as Facebook Friends” rule in the case of a pre-existing relationship. Still, having a parent in a teacher’s social network can lead to an uncomfortable conversation when the parent’s comments do not reflect well on the teacher’s employer, colleagues, or students. Rebecca shared her incident:

One time, I had to say something to a parent. Her child [attends our school] but she’s not in my class. The parent was posting things that were more like complaints. I messaged her and said, ‘Be careful what you’re putting out there. This sounds negative, and doesn’t reflect well on the school.’ The parent, even though we were friends, was NOT happy that I said something to her about her posts. Now, I don’t know if I should say something if it ever happens again. I don’t want to lose a friend, but I don’t want them to speak badly about my school either. In some ways, it would just be easier to be unaware that comments like those are happening. (Rebecca, 32, Professional)

Rebecca enacted a professional role in order to protect the reputation of her employer, though her position directly conflicted with the role the parent expected—that of an understanding friend. Rebecca also expressed genuine concern that she lost the respect of a friend; knowing the parent is unhappy has led her to reconsider whether any positive outcome can result from being connected with a parent in a social network.

Such work related conflict is not restricted to teachers. Eight gamer informants suggested that they had encountered stress from managing this professional–personal interaction and some of these conflicts were quite traumatic. Ken (35, Gamer) shared a story to illustrate why he refuses to connect with colleagues, whether close friend or acquaintance, on Facebook:

As a manager, I was supposed to report anything I saw on any social network where an employee made a post that could be “embarrassing” to the company. I did not agree with this policy, so I never actually reported anything. I did, however, have to fire two employees because others reported them to my district manager. I don't remember the exact posts, but one of them was just an innocent post about having a bad day at work and did not even specifically mention [his employer]. I was told that it was enough because he had [the firm] listed as his employer in his Facebook profile. (Ken, 29, Gamer)

Stringent employment policies can cause a user to feel additional stresses in determining how much can be shared online without concern of reprisal from employers. As a less extreme, but more typical example, Sally expressed frustration with her co-workers’ tendency to share her personal social network postings with management, resulting in a tense work environment:

I used to have many of my co-workers on my Facebook page. But, one day, my manager came to me and asked why I had made a post about a policy that was just implemented. He wasn't a Friend on Facebook, and I know who told him. He wasn't too happy about my comment and it didn't bode well for me for a while at work. So, I just closed that Facebook page and opened a new one under a fake name. I don't want my manager knowing what I'm saying online, and now I know I can't trust my co-workers either. (Sally, 51, Gamer)

On the one hand, allowing co-workers to connect in Facebook can strengthen workplace relationships, leading to greater work satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work related

performance (Amstad et al. 2011). On the other hand, connecting in a social space can be intensely uncomfortable when the “friend” enacts the role of “colleague”. Such a violation can affect self-esteem, even if private comments do not result in negative repercussions. Participants’ desire to be respected in both a personal and professional context can create a tension in determining how to protect the ego when each role requires a conflicting response.

***The Need to Feel Secure: Social Etiquette and Privacy Concerns.*** Social network research has suggested that users’ networks consist of homogenous groups of individuals with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Van den Bulte and Wuyts 2007), a premise that drives the Facebook recommendation algorithms that suggest new Friend connections or brands a user may ‘like’. These algorithmically generated suggestions can result in a user receiving a Friend request from old classmates, acquaintances, colleagues, and even strangers. Though the requesting friend may share commonalities, participants are quick to acknowledge that the commonalities are not always of a nature that warrants the requestor to be included in a personal network. On the one hand, some users prefer to limit their personal network to those with whom the user shares a certain type of relationship in real life; on the other hand, users acknowledge that rejection of a friend request could be considered rude or hurtful by the requesting party.

The structure of social network games strongly encourages users to allow acquaintances and unknown individuals to be a part of their social network in order to progress within the game. Martha (59, Gamer) has several individuals in her social network who she does not know in an offline capacity, though she has allowed them to remain in her network due to concerns of social etiquette: “I don’t want to un-friend someone, because they may notice and think I’m rude. Instead, I just hide their posts so I don’t have to see them.” Because Martha doesn’t use her

social network extensively to update friends and family, she does not feel as though her personal information is insecure in the social space.

Professionals also shared concerns related to managing the tension between a desire for privacy and a sense of obligation. Users who receive a request from a distant acquaintance may feel awkward in rejecting the request. Lauren (38, Professional) shared her experience with the group:

My friend's mother sent me a friend request. I don't regularly talk to the lady, but I know her because of her daughter. I don't want to interact with her regularly, and I don't want her seeing what I'm doing or commenting on my posts. I didn't respond to her Friend request because I didn't want her in my network, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings by rejecting her request either. So, I pretend I never saw it. If she ever asks me about it, I'll just lie and tell her I never saw it. (Lauren, 38, Professional)

As users become more involved in social networks, they are grappling with the rules they employ to determine appropriate communal behaviors. Social network missteps can be costly, not only from a professional standpoint, but also from a social capital standpoint. Most participants acknowledge a concern of being viewed as rude by those whom they interact with offline—even if they don't feel these individuals should be a part of their personal social network.

Another concern that generated considerable focus group discussion was that of online predators. With the growing prevalence of Facebook, participants in both data sets suggest Facebook usage creates vulnerability to predators, particularly in the case of women and children. Valerie (34 Gamer) and Lacy (29, Gamer) both expressed concerns related to allowing unknown individuals to view pictures of their children, activities, and personal information they share through Facebook. Lacy suggests that her Facebook network is limited, "...mostly to friends, because of wariness of predators. Plus, because my husband is in the military, I have to be careful." Participants often cited security reasons as primary issues they consider in evaluating

whether or not to accept a friend request. Tanya has visited students' pages after the student has requested they become 'Friends' on Facebook, and is concerned with the amount of information that is visible:

I'm absolutely shocked to see my students don't have their profiles locked down. Don't parents monitor their kids' Facebook pages? Anyone can see the kid's information, and many of them list their home addresses or share very detailed schedules. It's just dangerous to have that much information out there. (Tanya, 35, Professional)

Renita also voiced concern over such detailed information being available to those who may have ulterior motives. Renita explains her reasoning:

I know Facebook will let you check-in to places so your friends know where you are. I don't do this, because I don't want to leave my house vulnerable for break-ins. I'm really careful not to post when my husband is away, or when we go on vacation. I'll post pictures when we get back, but I think it's too risky to post something while I'm gone. You never really know what someone's intentions are, and it's not worth the risk. My Facebook friends can know where I went or see pictures when I get home. (Renita, 38, Professional)

With the ever widening network of 'friends' in a social network, users find it much more difficult to know the true intentions of the audience. Unknown individuals raise concerns for the participants as they consider the amount of information they are comfortable sharing with their digital audience; users are quite concerned that sharing too much information can make them unnecessarily vulnerable to predators.

***The Need to feel Accepted: Close Friends and Distant Acquaintances.*** Differing expectations between close friends and acquaintances is another motivation for ego maintenance. An individual's interactions with those whom she enjoys a close relationship is likely to be quite different than interactions with distant friends or acquaintances. A user's tolerance for certain behaviors between the two groups may also vary considerably. Many participants reveal that their social network includes individuals they'd rather not have in their network, though participants have refrained from removing the person, due to a concern of hurting the feelings of

the network user. In discussing this topic, many participants shared personal instances of being removed from a Friend's social network and relayed a sense of hurt or dismay at their expulsion; these feelings were primarily cited as a reason they choose not to remove an individual without a justifiable reason. As a personal compromise, users elected to hide the News Feed posts from connections they are not interested in seeing.

Participants also noted a tendency to be more open-minded with regard to close friends' comments, postings, and activities, overlooking items they would not find acceptable from other network members. Tolerance seemed to vary the greatest between family and others in the network among the topics of explicit language, sexuality, religion, and politics. Participants are tolerant of network connections' views just as in real life, although an overbearing presence of posts the participant disagrees with can create an uncomfortable situation. Ken recognizes that he sometimes uses profanity, but also suggests he is turned off by frequent use of vulgar language in his News Feed:

I tend to delete anyone who posts status updates that are overly sexual or vulgar. I have deleted some people because of the extensive use of offensive language. I am a very open minded person (and can have a potty mouth myself sometimes), but there is a limit. (Ken, 35, Gamer)

Excessive vulgar language was cited by five interviewees as a reason that network members were removed. James, on the other hand, is concerned about language due to his son sometimes logging onto James' Facebook account:

My son occasionally uses my Facebook, and I don't like profanity. I was an Archery Coach, so I have a lot of parents that I've added to my friends. And I was a substitute teacher for a while. So I have a lot of professional people in my network. I don't want my son logging into my account and seeing language he isn't exposed to at home. There's no need for that on Facebook. (James, 36, Gamer)

Secondary to explicit language, political and religious beliefs also cause tension in determining how much of oneself to share with their network. Lisa explains how political division within her husband's family caused him to close his Facebook account altogether:

My husband used to have a Facebook account. In his family, all of the women are republican and all of the men are democrats. He was always bickering back and forth with his sisters about politics on Facebook. Finally, he got so mad at them that he closed his account. Now he uses my page to get on Facebook and see what's going on. (Lisa, 61, Gamer)

Interviewees acknowledge that they try to be true to themselves, but they also try to be mindful and respectful of others in their network who may not share the same views.

Professional participants suggested that tolerance for images shared on Facebook also vary between close and distant friends. When asked about the types of images they see on Facebook that make them feel uncomfortable, Lauren volunteered two examples of imagery:

In all of the pictures my nieces post online, it looks like they are going to the club. Don't get me wrong, my nieces are young and beautiful. But it's obvious that they are trying to get attention. I just don't think it's the most appropriate thing to post online. But, I recognize that I'm older and this is part of what their generation does. Another example that comes to mind is this girl I was friends with in high school that moved to Las Vegas to become a show girl. She was posting a lot of pictures of herself in her showgirl costumes—or lack thereof. It was clear that she wasn't posting because it was her profession, but more so to get attention. So I de-friended her. (Lauren, 38, Professional)

While there is a sense of tolerance for closer relationships, acquaintances aren't necessarily given the same benefit. Participants did not feel uneasy in extracting a 'Friend' from their social network when the person had acted in a way that made the participant uncomfortable. In this vein, participants feel that the Friend must give the participant a reason to exclude the person from their network. Participants suggest that the network connection is often allowed to remain in their network unless the person behaves in an unacceptable manner; at that time, the participant will choose to un-friend the connection.

### **Maintaining a Balanced Ego**

Role conflict is conceptualized as the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person, and is an unavoidable, stressful outcome of social interactions (Biddle 1986). Conflicting expectations and tension result in individuals enacting self-regulation behaviors to reduce the stress (Freud 1920/1952; Goffman 1963). At any given time, a person has specific concerns and interests that guide self-regulation behaviors. An individual's choice to enact or obfuscate a particular behavior is driven by the person's desire to maintain a balanced ego—putting forth a presentation that the audience would find believable while also managing to 'put their best foot forward'.

When role conflict emerges in the context of a social network, our findings revealed that participants use two primary self-regulation strategies in maintaining ego balance: self-promotion and self-protection. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, and individuals often use a combination of preventive and promoting behaviors in tandem to present an ideal self to the audience (Higgins 2002). We discuss the promotion and prevention strategies in more detail in the following section.

***Self Promotion.*** Tice et al. (1995) found that individuals tend to self-present in a more boastful manner with strangers and a more modest manner with friends, due to friends' knowledge of prior accomplishments and skills. Schlenker (1980) posits that self-presentation is a constant trade-off between favorability and plausibility, an issue that is only exacerbated in a social networking context when multiple audiences of differing relationships are present in a single space. Participants noted two types of self-promoting behaviors that are enacted to manage the tensions associated with impression management in a social network: affirmation and affiliation.



*Affirmation.* Self-affirmation refers to behavioral or cognitive events that bolster the perceived integrity of the self, its overall adaptive and moral adequacy (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009; Steel 1988). Data analysis revealed that users post information on social networks as a presentational technique in order to bolster themselves and be viewed in the most positive light in three primary ways: altruism, mavenism, and schadenfreudism. Beginning with our gaming interviews, bolstering became apparent as gamers shared their thoughts on gaming etiquette. Gamer's felt that it was important to be a 'good neighbor', and this desire was responsible for many of the gamer's behaviors within the game. Carlie explains her neighborly activities:

I try to be a good neighbor to my game friends—going over to their farm and fertilizing crops or placing a note of encouragement on their farm when I see something I like. I want my neighbors to know I care about them. I also make it a point to thank the neighbors that come over to my farm and help out. There are worthless neighbors out there that are only in the game for themselves. But, I'm not like that and I want my neighbors to know that I'm here to help them, too. (Carlie, 32, Gamer)

Though the activity of helping another neighbor is outwardly altruistic, gamers also want to ensure that their neighbors are aware of the activities they perform. Through signage or comments to the neighbor, the participant is able to subtly call attention to her altruistic behaviors, thereby reinforcing her ego.

Informants also find value in utilizing social networks as a means to promote themselves as a market maven within her network. According to Feick and Price (1987), a market maven initiates discussions with and responds to information requests from other consumers. Sarah discusses her desire to help small businesses become successful.

It's free advertising for a company. You know, if you're friends with the owner and you believe in the company, you want to help them. The more that [the brand's] name gets out there, the more successful they will be in their business. And I want to support them in some way. For instance, there's a great jewelry designer in Texas, and I love their work. I thought, 'I should see if he has a Facebook page'. Sure enough, he did. Wouldn't it be cool if some of my local friends saw that I was a Fan and then became customers of

his business? It's neat to be able to link the world for good reasons, and not focus on bad things. (Sarah, 49, Professional)

This mavenistic desire to help network for a friend's business is illustrative of Granovetter's (1983) bridging role of weak ties. Granovetter suggests that not all weak ties are beneficial, though those who do disseminate information between unrelated groups of individuals serve a valuable role to her entire network. Sarah enjoys the role of market maven, and uses her social network as an opportunity to help her friends become aware of businesses that she values. Sarah's role as a maven has also led friends to seek her advice regarding subjects in which she frequently posts.

Participants also acknowledge that social networks allow them to inconspicuously locate and view unconnected others, and such activities often lead to feelings of *schadenfreude*, defined as "pleasure at the misfortune of others" (Heider 1958). Van Dijk et al. (2011) found that misfortunes of others provide an opportunity to enhance or protect one's own ego. Schmeichel and Vohs (2009) suggest that ego threats tend to elicit reflexive, self-enhancing tendencies that are thought to stem from motivations to view oneself positively, and such responses can range from minor attitudinal changes to blatant outgroup derogation. The easily accessible information available in the digital era can facilitate self-enhancing tendencies. Megan, shares a story about her reviewing an adversary's Facebook page:

We've all done it... stalk someone you aren't friends with. You know, look at their page to see what you can find out about them. For example, there was a wedding recently that we weren't invited to. My sister and I did some research—looking at all of the wedding pictures on Facebook. And we had our own commentary as we looked at the photos. I mean the wedding colors were awful. And her wedding just looked cheap. It made me feel a little bit better about not being invited. (Megan, 27, Professional)

Other participants acknowledge having "stalked" ex-boyfriends or neighbors in order to learn more about the person's current events. In most cases, the participant didn't want to become

friends with the person, but rather, wanted to see what the individual was doing in order to feel better about herself. Schadenfreude was cited by many participants as somewhat common in social networks.

*Affiliation.* Goffman (1963; p.113) notes that “the nature of an individual ... is generated by the nature of his group affiliations.” Individuals often make known tangential connections with positive sources because they understand that observers to these connections also evaluate connected objects similarly (e.g. The team is a winner, therefore she is also a winner) (Cialdini 1976). Escalas and Bettman (2003) posit that self-enhancement needs lead to forming connections with brands associated with aspirational groups. Association with objects, brands, institutions, and commercial enterprises is quite common in online spaces (Kozinets et al. 2010; Schau and Gilly 2003), and research suggests these associations can lead to greater outward self esteem, serving a social purpose by reflecting social ties to family, community, and cultural groups (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Keller 1993; Reingen et al. 1984). The present study uncovered tangential connections to three primary sources: corporate brands, sports teams, and inspirational organizations.

Connecting with brands or other organizations offer an extensive list of benefits to social network users. Industry research has found that social network users often connect with brands in order to receive advance news, deals, and learn more about the company (McCann 2010). McCann’s (2010) findings also suggest that users enjoy associating with institutions and brands they think are ‘cool’. Focus group participants volunteered sports teams as an association they were highly likely to make in a social networking context. Tanya shares her reasoning for connecting with a sports team:

I used to play soccer for Alabama, and I still know a lot of the coaches at the school. I guess I feel an allegiance to the University, because that time in my life was such a part

of me. Even today, when they are playing, I put a message on my Wall to cheer them on. I want people to know I'm an Alabama fan. I'm proud of it. (Tanya, 35, Professional)

Though Tanya does not specifically contribute to the successes of her alma mater, she feels it is important to support the team and let others know that she's affiliated with the team. Cialdini (1976) found that such associations are due to a desire to maintain one's ego.

Though sports teams were the most frequently cited affiliation category, other users find value in other types of associations. Valerie explained why she chose to connect with her church:

Our church is small, so everyone knows each other. I go to church every time the doors are open, but being connected through Facebook gives me real-time information about members of the congregation, activities that the church is involved in, and even inspirational quotes. I like logging on to Facebook and seeing a message from our pastor—it's uplifting to have God-inspired messaging the other 6 days a week. Sometimes, I even share the pastor's message on my Wall for others to see. (Valerie, 34, Gamer)

Valerie finds inspirational value in being able to connect with an institution that she feels is an integral part of her life. Valerie's sharing behavior serves a dual purpose—allowing others to be inspired, as well as serving as a notification to those in her network that she is actively engaged in her church. By sharing spiritual messaging from her church, Valerie is able to exemplify the lifestyle that she wishes to portray to her network.

***Ego Maintenance as a form of Self Protection.*** Ego protection is regarded as a fundamental goal that guides social behavior (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice1993). In instances where a behavior has considerable likelihood of becoming known to multiple audiences, an individual is more likely to enact ego-protective behaviors in order to maintain credibility across all groups. Social network users recognize that posts which may cast a user in a positive light to one set of relationships (i.e. family members) may in fact be viewed negatively by another set of relationships (i.e. colleagues), resulting in damaged relationships or other negative repercussions. Social network users attempt to minimize negative outcomes by

employing a number of self-regulation techniques to protect the ego. Our study found that self-protection can range from maintaining multiple accounts to limiting the types of personal information and posts that others are able to see. Two categories of self-regulating behaviors are used to address these tensions: structural solutions and self-censoring. Each of these categories is comprised of multiple strategies, which are discussed further in the following sections.

*Structural Solutions.* Participants in both phases concede that the growing prevalence of Facebook has led them to more carefully manage their network. When social networks were first introduced, users were less restrictive in managing their social network membership, often allowing any user who requested permission to be a part of her social network. As social networks have gained popularity, participants have implemented a growing set of rules to guide decisions related to accepting friend requests and managing the types of relationships that are present in their network. Our research has found that the primary motivation for participants' changing network management rules is related to their concern of how information shared in a social network could impact others' opinion of them. Three primary structural solutions emerged over the course of our research: network partitioning, maintaining multiple accounts, and utilization of the Facebook grouping function.

The most common mechanism for managing online presentation is to partition different relationships into different online communities (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). While Facebook was originally designed to keep college classmates and close friends in touch, business colleagues who consider themselves friends may be offended when a friend request is rejected. Ken (35, Gamer) feels that while it is not in his interests to be Friends with employees or management, he will allow these individuals to connect with him in LinkedIn, noting that LinkedIn is not used to share personal information. Ken noted that his strict policy against

having work relationships online have led to some uncomfortable conversations with those who have been denied access. However, because he consistently implements his policy across all work relationships, his co-workers are accepting of his choices. Most participants acknowledge restricting access for certain types of relationships, with the most prevalent qualifier for inclusion in a social network being the strength of the offline relationship.

In the most extreme case, users choose to maintain separate social media accounts in order to segregate the types of relationships associated with an account. Jeremy (55, Gamer) began a second Facebook account dedicated solely to his church congregation members and family. Jeremy felt that a second page would allow him to more fully share himself online with those whom he felt close to, while also maintaining a distant connection with classmates or acquaintances. Jeremy maintained his dual account for approximately 3 months, but found the duplicate updates too much to manage on an ongoing basis.

While the teacher informants adamantly refuse to allow unknown individuals into their network, our gamer informants were slightly less stringent. Participants who allow unknown individuals into their social network often cited the use of a proxy to determine the relationship quality of the requestor. Four participants indicated that when they received requests from unknown individuals, they reviewed mutual Friends; only when Friends were of high quality would Friend status be granted. And though gamers do allow unknown individuals into their network, these individuals are often extracted when the individual no longer provides a game-related benefit. Seven interview participants indicated that they use common Friends as a proxy to determine the personal qualities of the requestor. Racquel describes her process:

I look at the friends we have in common when I'm considering whether to let the person be a part of my network. If the friend we have in common is a good game neighbor, then I give the unknown person the benefit of the doubt. If the friend we have in common isn't a good neighbor, then I won't accept the request. I don't need any more dead beat

neighbors! I need neighbors who play the game regularly so we can both benefit.  
(Racquel, 29, Gamer)

Heuristics such as this can help users to quickly determine how to respond to a Friend request, though Samantha discusses an experience in which this heuristic did not lead to a desirable outcome:

I had this one neighbor that was snagging *MY* friends. I didn't know her— I accepted her because she's a friend of a good Farmville neighbor. She went to my Friend list on my wall, went from A to Z, and sent out a Friend Request to each one of them. Now, to me, I think that was kind of rude... I felt violated. That was my personal information. So, now, none of my friends can see my Friend list unless they're also that person's friend, too.  
(Samantha, 44, Gamer)

Samantha's experience highlights the differing social value protocols that exist in a social network, even between similar friends. While the common friend was viewed as a trustworthy, good neighbor, the new connection had made a serious violation of acceptable social network protocol. Samantha's friends who know her personally are expected to know she would feel violated. Yet, strangers aren't likely to have this same level of personal knowledge, and may act in self-opportunistic ways that violate the individual's acceptable protocol.

In an attempt to address the issues that individuals encounter with regard to portraying different facets of oneself to different groups, Facebook introduced a group function that allows users to create groups based on similarities between individuals, and communicate privately with each group in a similar manner to having conversations in real life. Participants widely reported a desire to share certain aspects of themselves with targeted audiences without others knowing. Penelope (22, Gamer) and Racquel (29, Gamer) both indicated that they use groups to interact with a subset of Friends that serve a similar purpose in their lives. Penelope uses the group function to make plans with a group of close friends and share pictures that she doesn't wish to

share with her entire network. Racquel has used the group function to create a support group to help her cope with her son's illness:

I don't necessarily want to share my son's medical challenges and personal triumphs with everyone, so I created a group of really close friends and family that I can share things with. They are my support group on bad days and my cheering camp on good days. (Racquel 29, Gamer)

Through this private group, Racquel is able to share personal details that she doesn't wish to share with her entire network. Other informants utilize the group function as a courtesy to others who may find some posts irrelevant or annoying. Daniel (47, Gamer) and James (36, Gamer) use groups to share game related posts with neighbors without annoying network members who do not play.

While the grouping functionality is a first step in creating an online environment that is more similar to offline communications, the grouping function is not fully trusted by social network users (Skeels and Grudin 2009). Further, only a small percentage of our informants were aware of grouping functionality in Facebook, and only 5 informants used groups on a regular basis in order to communicate privately with small audiences. Moreover, our participants often cited trust concerns related to Facebook settings that are frequently changed. Annette's concerns surfaced in both focus groups and interviews:

I saw the grouping option in Facebook, but I'm not sure I trust it. I mean, it seems like every other month there's a new privacy change and you have to go and check all of your settings all over again. And you never know if something you set last month has been undone in the latest privacy change. Then, something you meant to be private is now public. And who's to say that wouldn't happen with groups? I just don't trust Facebook to keep my private stuff private. And, depending on the nature of the conversation in a group, whatever is now public could be really embarrassing or hurtful to someone. I just don't trust Facebook. (Annette, 31, Professional)

Annette acknowledges that a grouping function maybe beneficial. But the risk associated with a breach of confidence could damage relationships with others. Facebook trust issues could also



explain a slower adoption rate for the group function, as users are still unsure if the information they intend to keep hidden is indeed obscured from individuals as expected.

*Self-Censoring.* The second category of ego protection behaviors is self-censorship. Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) suggest that individuals may moderate extreme attitudes on sensitive issues in order to make a better impression. In this vein, users do not attempt to boastfully present themselves to others so much as they attempt to keep information private that may cause those in her network to become confrontational or negative. Informants noted that they try to be more moderate on Facebook than they are in face-to-face interactions, recognizing the diverse audience to which they communicate online. Our research uncovered three self-censoring mechanisms: restricting personal information, censoring posting behaviors, and censoring connections with brands.

Participants often cope with this audience variability by limiting personal information shared or by restricting religious and political posts to comments that are less inflammatory. Concern for moderation also influences users' decisions to 'like' or comment on others' posts. Sarah (49, Professional) and Racquel (29, Gamer) have wanted to 'Like' a Friend's post but chose not to in order to avoid conflict or scrutiny from others in their network. Penelope consciously monitors her self-presentation online. As a young adult, she is concerned about how future employers may feel about her online activities:

Um, especially commenting, like making a comment if it was something...not the most appropriate. People would always be able to click on the comment you made and it could mislead them, and not give the best impression of me. I know how people sometimes take things the wrong way on Facebook. And sometimes [people viewing my profile] may consider me for something like graduate school or a job, so I just self limit. (Penelope, 22, Gamer)

With the proliferation of social networks in everyday life, users are becoming more aware of the possible negative implications associated with social network usage. Daniel sums up his concern for privacy in social networks such as Facebook:

As a rule of thumb, anything I post is fit for general audiences. One should always assume that anything posted privately has the potential to be made public, similar to “the gun is always loaded” safety precaution. (Daniel, 47, Gamer)

Recognizing the inherent dangers of information being inadvertently disclosed to an audience has led many individuals to become more restrictive in the types of information shared online.

Interestingly, censorship is not limited to comments and images that are shared online; the stigma attached to social network gaming has also led many participants to censor their behaviors (Goffman 1963). Penelope (22, Gamer) discontinued playing Farmville due to the overwhelming number of Wall posts required by the game. Deborah (43, Gamer) revealed that she will make some game related posts, but tries to limit her postings to those which she feels are most valuable to her neighbors. Maggie takes an interesting approach to managing her game related posts:

I will post game stuff in the evenings when I play. But, I go out to my wall before bed every night and remove all of the posts that I’ve made. Neighbors can only get the stuff for a day anyway, and I don’t want those posts to sit on my wall forever. (Maggie, 30, Gamer)

Balancing a concern for being a good neighbor with that of attempting to avoid scrutiny, Maggie takes additional steps in order to appease all audiences. Though Maggie embraces game playing as a way to interact with her husband and family that are not local, she doesn’t want her professors or PhD colleagues to see that she spends her free time playing games.

Censorship also extends to the brands that a user is willing to engage with online. Participants concede that public association with brands, groups, or other entities is not always desirable, even when the brand is one that is used regularly. Prior literature has focused on the

public versus private dichotomy (Graeff 1996), but our participants suggest the desire to associate or dissociate with a brand in a social network goes much further. Rebecca expressed concern over being an advertising tool for some well known brands:

I shop at Wal-mart, Target, even Publix. But, I don't want their advertisements in my News Feed. And, I don't feel like I should give them free advertising to all of my friends. What do I get out of it? More of their advertising in my News Feed? No thanks. I do like some company pages on Facebook, but I mostly limit them to friends' businesses or important organizations that I believe in. (Rebecca, 53, Professional)

Rebecca's comment underscores the point that brands must make a compelling value proposition to be a part of a user's social network. Users' social network space is viewed as sacred space, and consumers are not open to invasive advertising techniques.

In addition to concerns over becoming an advertiser for large companies, a few participants expressed concern over sharing too much information related to private consumption practices such as credit card usage. During an interview with Tisha, she brought up a recent advertising promotion that occurred in the context of Farmville:

Farmville recently had a promotion with AMEX where you go out to the American Express Facebook page and become a "Fan" in order to get a limited edition statue in the game. I really wanted the statue, but I didn't want American Express in my News Feed. I mean, I use AMEX for my business, but I don't need to see advertising to remind me I'm a customer. And, my friends don't need to know which credit cards I like or use—that's too much information to share. So, I went out to their page, became a fan, got my statue, and then went right back to their page to remove my Fan status. I got what I wanted, and I don't have to look at their advertisements in my News Feed every time I sign on to Facebook. (Tisha, 55, Gamer)

Tisha's example illustrates an interesting tension in a digital era where every association can become a cause for concern. Some social media campaigns may be geared toward building a Fan base for future advertising promotions, though savvy users find opportunities to maneuver around the campaign requirements in order to receive the items without providing the long term benefit the firm had anticipated.

In yet other instances, users have chosen to avoid public endorsement of a firm that may be seen as confrontational or offensive to others in the social network. Sarah volunteered:

I ‘may’ own a gun, but I’m not going to advertise it by becoming a fan of Smith and Wesson on my Facebook page. Some people feel strongly about gun ownership—even in this group. I don’t feel so strongly about a gun manufacturer that I want to create a divisive situation between friends on my Facebook page. So, I choose not to like things that could cause hostility among my friends. (Sarah, 49, Professional)

Sarah feels that her views toward gun ownership are too controversial among her friends, and chooses to shield herself from potentially damaging relationships she finds valuable. Censorship in a social network context offers users the greatest flexibility to individuals in terms of protecting the ego.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Considering the concept of the superego, Sandler (1987) suggests that people possess organizing activities that foster an ideal self representation to serve the greatest degree of well being for the individual. In this process, people utilize external schemata collected from their social past (e.g., parents, friends) to modify their self presentation. In other words, people have an innate desire to present the self that will be accepted in a particular social interaction. However, self-presentation tension is inevitable, because individuals invoke multiple roles throughout the course of a day, dependent upon the audience and the particular goals one is trying to achieve. The present research contributes to the existing literature in three ways: self-promoting and self-preventive strategies are used in tandem to maintain ego balance and present the ideal self; the proliferation of social media has led individuals to more closely examine behaviors in an online and offline context; and, the value proposition for connecting with brands in a social context is considerably more rigorous than the proposition necessary to persuade a consumer to purchase their product.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) found that the level of publicity of one's behavior is likely to guide the importance of impression management. In the digital era where any and all activities have the ability to become public knowledge, impression management considerations are increasingly guiding the behaviors and concerns of consumers. Prior social network literature suggests the homophily principle—a theory that posits individuals surround themselves with an audience of similar characteristics (Van den Bulte and Wuyts 2008). Whereas role fulfillment in real life interactions is often guided by the audience at hand, convergence of different audiences in the same context can prove quite challenging for even the most savvy social network user.

Well adjusted individuals are adept at emphasizing different characteristics to differing audiences in real life, self-regulating to enact different roles depending upon the audience. Social networks are now resulting in users critically evaluating the merits of connecting with different relationships and the overarching implications of information sharing online. When a social network is less focused on a particular facet of oneself (e.g. Facebook), the network is much more likely to foster a diverse audience than a social network that is highly focused (e.g. LinkedIn). Social network users employ a number of strategies that allows the user to maintain personal integrity while also presenting their digital essence in a way that fulfills the varying expectations of a diverse audience. Our results suggest that users employ both promoting and preventive self-regulating behaviors in order to manage their self presentation online. Prior literature has suggested that self regulatory behaviors are enacted as promotion-focused or prevention-focused (Higgins 1997). However, each of our participants cited instances of utilizing both dichotomous behaviors in tandem to present an ideal self to their audience, thereby maintaining ego balance.

The widespread influence of social networks has also influenced users' choice of activities online. Social network games were initially introduced as a means to allow users to engage with one another (Facebook 2012). Our findings suggest that social network users are likely to utilize self-regulating behaviors to a greater extent when negative repercussions of social network users have greater reach. Popular press has cited numerous examples of teachers who have lost their job for behaviors that were found on Facebook, and these concerns are salient as teachers make decisions related to their impression in social media (Downey 2010; Lim 2012; Protalinski 2012; Swanson 2010). Our findings categorize the ways in which this professional group has modified both social network usage and offline behaviors in order to adapt to the considerable risk of job loss if the wrong image is portrayed.

Some users find value in connecting with a brand in a social media space, though a brand's value proposition in this personal context must far outweigh the perceived costs to the user. Our participants suggest that merely being a brand patron does not suggest the individual is likely to become a Fan in a social network. Users' justifications to publicly endorse a brand are quite individualistic; some find value in special coupons or deals while others suggest that a strong connection to the brand must exist before the user will consider adding the brand to her social network. Many social network users have a strong conviction related to advertising for the brand, and these principles may guide the user's decision to refrain from becoming a brand Fan.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The present research was conducted in two contexts representing different social contexts—gamers and professionals. These study contexts were chosen based on a prevalence of popular press associated with social network usage by these user groups. Other segments may elicit additional self presentational concerns and opportunities. The present research focused on

social network user's perception of others' expectations in a social networking context. One can only anticipate how an un-posted comment, photograph, or other digital artifact may be received by their audience, and therefore the findings are based solely on the participant's perception of audience expectations.

Future research could investigate the effect of self-monitoring on a user's propensity to disclose information to an audience online. The present research suggests that users in high visibility positions are more likely to disclose less information. Future research should investigate other antecedents that influence the amount of information disclosed in a social network context. Future research could also investigate the importance of privacy and the concern of predators. Our participants were particularly concerned with the presence of predators in a social network. As social network popularity grows, what actions can be taken on the part of social network developers (e.g. Facebook) to alleviate users' self-presentational concerns? Finally, future research should seek to understand the motivational factors for connecting with a brand or company in a social network. Many participants suggested they would not affiliate with goods consumed privately (e.g. Victoria's Secret), as this was too much information to share with acquaintance types of network ties. Research should investigate the types of value proposition that would help overcome user objections to associate publicly with privately consumed goods.

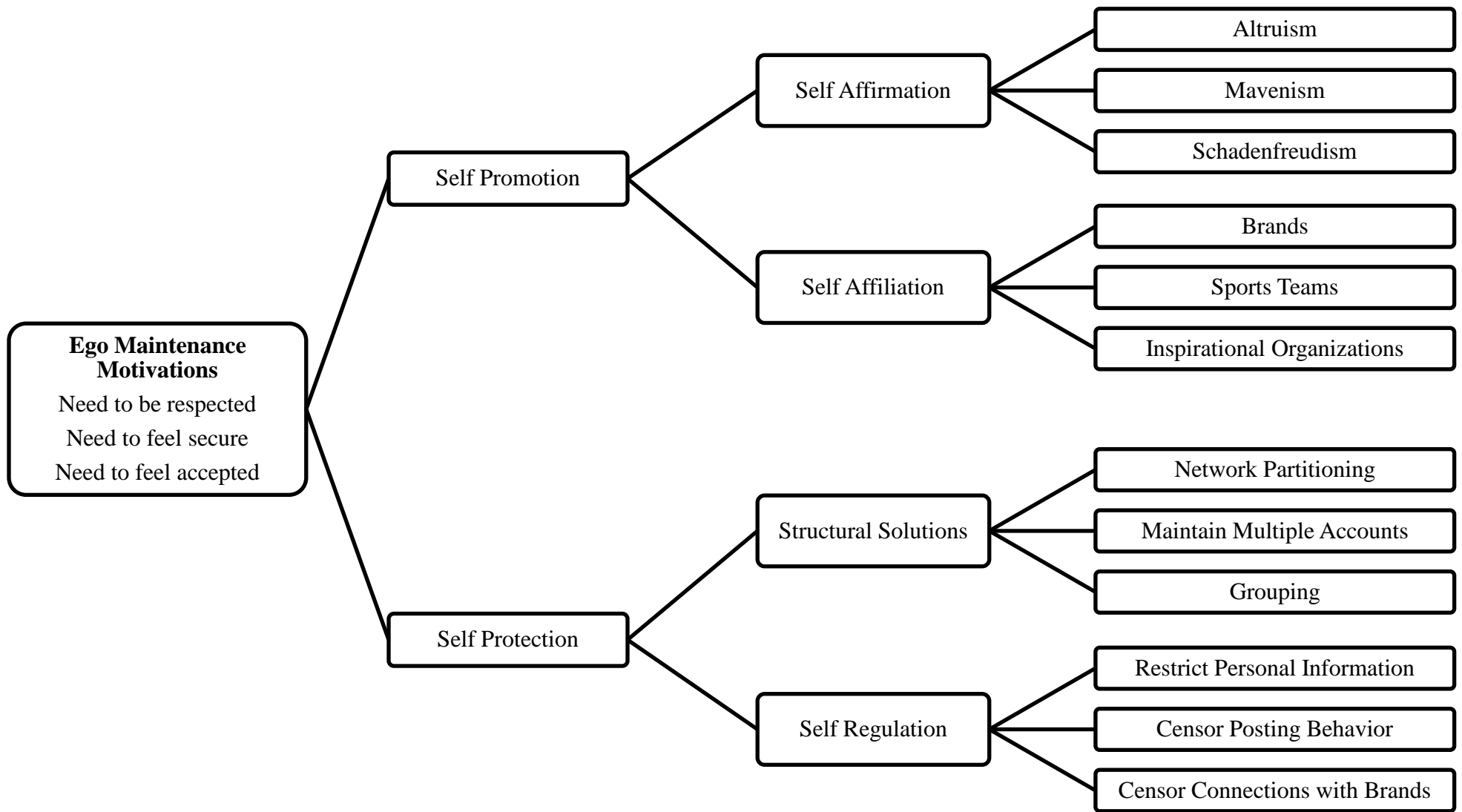
**Table 2.1: In-Depth Interview Participant Characteristics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Samantha	44	F	TN	Cake Decorator
James	36	M	KY	Manager
Tisha	55	F	TN	Small Business Owner
Maggie	30	F	GA	Student
Opal	57	F	OR	Retired
Jeremy	55	M	GA	Pastor
Daniel	47	M	Korea	House Husband
Sally	51	F	NJ	Meat Cutter's Union
Penelope	22	F	PA	Student
Lisa	61	F	TX	Retired
Ken	35	M	TN	Customer Service Rep
Deborah	43	F	Korea	Army Paralegal
Racquel	29	F	UK	Stay at Home Mom
Lindsey	49	F	TN	Hairdresser
Martha	59	F	CA	Teacher
Valerie	34	F	GA	Teacher
Lacy	29	F	MI	Ministry Volunteer
Carlie	32	F	GA	Cake Decorator



**Table 2.2: Focus Group Participant Characteristics**

	Name	Age	Number of Years on Facebook	Years Teaching Experience	Live and Work in Community
Group 1	Sarah	49	5	2	Yes
	Rebecca	53	4	2	No
	Pamela	57	3	30	Yes
	Annette	31	7	2	Yes
	Amelia	48	3	5	Yes
Group 2	Lauren	38	5	12	No
	Tanya	35	5	8	Yes
	Megan	27	7	4	No
	Paige	36	4	10	No
	Deana	42	3	18	No
	Renita	38	5	10	Yes



**Figure 2.1: Descriptive Model of Findings**

## CHAPTER 3

### Branding Effectiveness in Social Network Games: A Framework for Marketing Communications Integration<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Killian, Ginger and John Hulland. To be submitted to *Journal of Marketing*.

## **ABSTRACT**

The present research proposes a typology of social network game-based promotion effectiveness. Building upon the MDA framework from the gaming literature (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck 2004), the author proposes a new F-A typology framework that includes the axes of functional congruency (in game versus out of game promotions) and aesthetic congruency (promotional offering aligns with players' motivations for playing the game versus a promotional offering that does not align with player motivations for playing the game). Eighteen in-depth interviews with current and previous Farmville gamers are used to refine the F-A typology. A second study encompassing 3,086 message board posts related to four branded promotions within Farmville was also examined in order to further substantiate the typology. Additional functional congruency issues were also uncovered in the second study.

“With social gaming, that is a space advertisers must be very careful about. Players are very, very passionate about their game. So if advertisers do it incorrectly, especially in that space, they’re going to have some serious repercussions. Brands should focus on giving players something that's going to help move the game experience to a more positive experience.” — Sabrina Galati, VP Media Director, Gyro

## **INTRODUCTION**

More than 275 million social network users play games, and advertisers are increasingly turning to social network games as a viable platform for advertising and promotion (App Data 2012). Games within social networks allow individuals to play together in a context that is neither temporally nor geographically restricted, allowing them to initiate, maintain, and enhance relationships with others in their network (Wohn et al. 2011). Marketers are responding to this growth of social network games by developing innovative online marketing communications campaigns to reach the gamer segment. However, utilizing traditional methods of commercial- or signage-type advertising can lead to frustration or resentment if the gaming experience is turned into a continuous advertising channel. Thus, game developers and brand managers alike must ask themselves how to integrate promotional activities in such a way as to become a welcomed, beneficial part of the game experience.

The present research proposes a marketing communications typology to provide guidance to brand managers who wish to utilize social network games as a communication platform. The research objective of the present study is to develop and test a typology for effective marketing communication message integration into social network games. Firms should strive to create communication messages that align with the goals of both the firm and the player. A firm that is able to do both can generate increased player receptiveness and responsiveness to the marketing communication message, resulting in greater sales and more positive affect toward the brand.

## **BACKGROUND**

The evolution of the internet and social network games offers brand managers a unique opportunity to engage with consumers in an entertainment venue and to then extend the brand-customer relationship beyond the entertainment experience. The following sections provide a brief overview of advertising within games as well as explication of product placement literature. An understanding of the evolution of online games and game based advertising is important in order to understand how to successfully integrate into a game in such a way that supports the end goals of the firm (e.g. sales) as well as those of the player (e.g. accomplishment of a game-related goal). The remainder of this section explicates the evolution of games and the related product placement persuasion literature.

### **Evolution of Games**

In this section, we aim to provide a broad overview of brand-based advertising in games. We explicate the importance of advergames and in-game advertising, and then discuss how social network games offer a comparatively better alternative to advergames and other online game experiences. Social network games are conducted within a platform that allows connected individuals to play together. The overlapping nature of the game and the broader social network context can allow marketing communications to influence activities outside the scope of the game, thereby increasing the reach and influence of a game-related communication.

***Advergames and Multi-Player Online Games.*** Advergames, one of the earliest forms of computer-based branded advertising, emphasize a single brand in a gaming context. These games began as basic computer games offered online through a brand's website. Earlier versions of advergames concentrated on building a brand's reputation by creating brand awareness with consumers. These games typically lacked a social component; players were challenged to

compete with themselves to reach a new high score. Later advergames incorporated social components into the game by offering players an opportunity to compete with complete strangers and chat online with one another, though the advergame format still lacked an ongoing challenge to motivate players to return to the site over time.

Advergames are advantageous to the development of brand equity in that the company has complete control over both the message positioning and customer engagement strategy. However, advergames also pose a number of challenges for brand managers. First, player receptiveness to pushed messaging inside advergames is quite mixed; while gamers recognize that the game was developed by the company, players rarely appreciate an advertisement's overt attempt at persuasion (Nelson 2005). Second, ongoing expenses associated with upgrading technology (i.e. servers) and content can eliminate any financial benefit the company may gain. Third, companies must invest heavily to drive awareness and traffic to the website, as these games are rarely located in a high internet traffic site. Given these considerable drawbacks, brand managers are beginning to find value in integrating marketing communications messages into games that are developed and maintained by third parties. These third party game applications are developed for the sole purpose of encouraging game play among consumers, and many games in this category have a considerable number of players who return to the game on a regular basis. Brand integration in a pre-existing game reduces or eliminates many of the challenges associated with the development and maintenance of advergames. Thus, brand managers are increasingly seeking opportunities in 3<sup>rd</sup> party games to engage with players online.

***Social Network Games.*** Social network games are among the newest type of third party game applications. Social networks have gained in popularity over the past decade, with Facebook leading the revolution. The impetus of social networks is to draw individuals together

and share their lives online. In 2007, Facebook began offering its members the opportunity to play games with their network “Friends”. The introduction of social network games occurred 6 months prior to the introduction of brand Fan pages in Facebook, illustrative of the social network’s emphasis on building and maintaining relationships online (Facebook 2012).

With social network gamers often spending more than an hour per day playing online, games are valuable real estate in the social media advertising realm. Social network games overcome many of the challenges posed by advergames; brand messages can quickly and easily be integrated into an existing game framework to reach a large, developed user base, while a company’s ongoing costs are also substantially reduced, as the costs associated with technology and audience generation are incurred by the game developer. However, the largest drawback to social network game advertising campaigns lies with the level of control over the messaging. Participation in social network games requires brand managers must give up a certain level of control, as they are integrating into someone else’s game platform.

The social network gaming industry is growing rapidly, and publically held game developers such as Zynga are now eager to incorporate branded marketing communications messages into their games in order to build the game brand and grow revenues. As of November, 2012, more than 251 million Facebook users reported playing games on the social network (Olanoff 2012). Of those, 55 percent are female and spend more than an hour per day playing games (Kaevand 2011), breaking the traditional stereotype that gamers are prepubescent, socially challenged males (Chambers 2005). As of 2012, 60% of the industry’s \$6.2 billion in revenue was generated through small, in-game purchases, while advertisers make up only 20% of the game developer’s revenue stream (Casual Games Association 2012). Explosive growth in the



gaming sector has not gone unnoticed by companies; social network game advertising reached an all-time high of \$300 million in 2011, a trend that is expected to continue (Kaevand 2011).

Social network games have evolved with the growing popularity of social networks. Unlike advergames or other online game networks (e.g. World of Warcraft) that allow players to engage with completely unknown individuals, social network games require users to be connected in the social network in order to play together online. In contrast to traditional game designs, social network games shift the focus from beating the clock or eliminating competition in favor of a friendlier, more cooperative climate. Social network games are designed so that participants are able to play together asynchronously without being bound by the temporal and geographic constraints. Gamers interact by performing activities in each other's digital game space and sharing items for mutual benefit. Gamers may compete with one another, but this competition is often limited to being on top of various leader boards. Social network games offer managers an enticing advertising alternative to access social network users who may be otherwise inaccessible on a social network; some players belong to a social network merely for the gaming experience, and do not use the social network for any other purpose. A brand's marketing communication messaging that is present in a social network game is able to reach this demographic where other social network communications initiatives may go unnoticed.

***Zynga and Farmville.*** Hundreds of Social Network Games are available on Facebook, though most have only a modest number of active users. The largest social network game developer, Zynga, claims more than 248 million monthly active users. Zynga's portfolio includes 17 distinct social games that draw at least 200,000 daily users (App Data 2011). The most popular and longest running game, Farmville, was developed and introduced by Zynga in 2009; even three years later, the game continues to draw more than 10 million daily users. The

longevity and popularity of Farmville, coupled with the researchers' knowledge of the game, provide a rich context with which to study players' receptivity to branded marketing communication messages in the context of online game play.

### **Product Placement and Persuasion**

Traditional media such as television and radio have long been the primary communication platform for brand advertising efforts. However, the tide is decidedly changing due to increased programming options and technological innovations such as TiVo, DVR, and Pandora that allow users to avoid unwanted advertisements (Nelson and Waiguny 2012). Further, with the eroding impact of traditional media, brand managers are increasingly turning to alternative advertising sources such as product placements in television programs, movies, and games in order to reach the elusive consumer. In 2003, for example, Coca-Cola announced plans to move away from television advertising in favor of video games and television- or movie-based product placements (Grover 2004).

Brand incorporation into entertainment sources offers a number of benefits for advertisers and consumers alike. Research has found that unobtrusive brand messaging adds realism to the story line (Gupta and Gould 1997; Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004; Ong and Meri 1994). Firms that participate in product placements benefit from the halo effect of positive emotions resulting from interactions with an entertainment source; these positive emotions are then often transferred to the brand, especially if the brand is a central piece of the story line (Glass, 2007; Nelson and Waiguny 2012; Redondo 2009). Finally, product placements that are congruent with the story line may avoid counter arguments, thereby increasing both believability and the advertisement's ability to persuade (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006).

In-game advertising is one of the more popular venues for product placement, though gamer receptivity to in-game advertising is decidedly mixed. Early product placement research suggested that gamers' support of in-game advertising and product placement primarily hinged on two assumptions: first, product placements would enhance realism; and second, brand participation would lead to lower costs and better games for the gamer (Chambers 2005; DeLorme and Reid 1999; Loftus 2004; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004). Though the second assumption has not panned out as gamers had expected, gamers still find value in a brand's ability to add realism to the gaming experience. Product placement in games offer an additional level of immersion, as players can interact with the brand in ways that can lead to longer term recall (Nelson 2005; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004). Because each game session is different (i.e. gamers can make different choices in each session), the gamer can interact with the brand in different ways, and for longer periods of time. However, players feel strongly that a brand's involvement must align with the overall gaming experience (Chambers 2005), or risk game and/or brand boycotts (Nelson 2005).

The general premise of social network games (e.g. Farmville) allows gamers to play at a more leisurely pace, which can allow players to engage with the marketing communication for a longer period of time. The inclusion of social networks in this type of game also allows brand managers to engage the player outside of the gaming platform by directing traffic to other online locales such as the brand Fan page of a social network. Game based marketing communications that encourage players to become a Fan of a brand can extend player involvement beyond the scope of the campaign, thereby creating an opportunity for a longer term relationship.

Unfortunately, there is often a mismatch between the goals of the brand's marketing communication and the gamer's motivation for playing the game. A gamer's primary interest in

playing is to satisfy an underlying motivation (e.g. escapism, challenge) through game play (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Holbrook et al. 1984). Brand managers tend to approach social network games with a primary focus of how to gain access to a captive audience, rather than asking themselves how the brand can further the gaming experience for the gamers. Brand managers should seek to design marketing communications that simultaneously fulfill the goals of the player while also meeting the firm's objectives. Players are willing to engage with brands in a gaming context, though the player benefits should be a central component of the campaign offering. Understanding the underlying motivations of players can help brand managers to develop a marketing communications campaign that is well aligned with the goals of the players. In the following sections, we explicate a typology to assist brand managers in developing the key components of successful marketing communications.

### **CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

This section begins with an overview of the MDA model, a framework that suggests the user experience should be the central component of game design (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck 2004). With the growing interest in alternative advertising venues, a new message integration model is necessary in order to better understand how brand managers can integrate advertising and communications into existing online games in a way that furthers the user experience as well as the brand communication's effectiveness. We adapt the MDA model into an advertising typology to propose a conceptual model that better explains how branded communications can engage consumers in the social network gaming context.

### **MDA Framework**

Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004) developed the MDA game design framework to bridge the gap between game developers and the gamer by explaining how different components

of game design can influence a gamer's motivation to play the game. Figure 3.1 illustrates the MDA framework as proposed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004). In traditional game design, game developers begin with the player's motivations for playing a game and work backward into the mechanics of how to program game elements in order to satisfy those player motivations. Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004) argue that a gamer's motivation should be at the core of the game development process, and that game developers should thus begin the game creation process by considering the aesthetic goals of the game. Aesthetics refer to the game's sensory appeal to one's motivation for playing. Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck propose a number of aesthetics that capture the gamer's underlying motivation for playing the game. For instance, if an underlying motivational goal is to create a challenge, game designers must decide whether the challenge is the result of time pressure or rarity of necessary tools. Likewise, if the underlying motivation is fantasy, the developer must determine what level of fantasy can be incorporated into a game without it becoming unrealistic to the gamer and thereby decreasing game interest. Aesthetics are a difficult, but critical characteristic of game design. Games with a highly motivating aesthetic design are able to fulfill the player's underlying motivation, generating longer periods of engagement with the game. On the other hand, game designs with weak motivational aspects are likely to result in lower player interest or a higher propensity to discontinue playing. Game developers typically attempt to incorporate multiple aesthetics in order to appeal to a wider gaming audience, although it is unlikely that games can successfully incorporate more than a few aesthetic motivations simultaneously.

After determining the types of aesthetic motivations the game developer wishes to evoke, the game designer must develop game components to induce these aesthetic motivations. Dynamics are the component of interaction between the gamer and the mechanical interface that

works to create the aesthetic experience. Dynamics bridge the gap between Mechanics and Aesthetics. Dynamics are the game's responses to the player's inputs, and aren't always known by the gamer. A considerable portion of the motivation and underlying pleasure derived from game play is in figuring out the dynamics that allow a gamer to progress. Mechanics, the final component of the model, is comprised of the back office programming language and fundamental rules of playing the game. Mechanics are not visible to a gamer, though the gamer is aware of their existence. Mechanical adjustments result in changing dynamics for the gamer, which can in turn affect the aesthetic motivation for playing. These three components work in tandem to create the overall experience for the gamer.

### **F-A Model**

We propose the F-A typology as a simplified version of the MDA framework that also addresses the challenge of incorporating marketing communications into a social network game. The Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004) framework clearly distinguishes between Mechanical and Dynamic components (and does so appropriately for the game design audience they speak to). From a gamer or advertiser perspective, the distinction between Mechanics and Dynamics is both invisible and unimportant. Thus, the F-A typology combines the programmatic elements of Mechanics and Dynamics into a single Functionality dimension. On the other hand, the Aesthetic component of game play is visibly present to the gamer, as it attends to the gamer's motivation for playing. Thus, we include Aesthetics as the second dimension of the F-A typology.

As marketing communication messages are integrated into social network games, they have the potential to be misaligned with the functional components of the game, the aesthetic motivations of the gamer, or both. Game-related marketing communications can be grouped into four categories that fall along two dimensions. For the purpose of this typology, each axis

dimension is presented as high versus low, and two dimensions (Functional Congruency, Aesthetic Congruency) are used, resulting a 2 x 2 matrix. Figure 3.2 summarizes the typology. Although many different types of marketing communications can be implemented within social network games, for the remainder of this paper we focus on a subset of communications—promotions—as examples to illustrate each cell. Further, our empirical studies focus on promotional efforts undertaken by marketers in the social network gaming context.

***Functional Congruency.*** Functionality captures the social network components as well as the in-game components that work together to create the overall game experience. Unlike traditional games, where players complete all tasks within the game itself, social network games require gamers to iterate between the game platform and the social network (e.g. Facebook) to collect necessary items or complete tasks. In the original MDA framework, there was no need to incorporate the concept of congruency, as aesthetics, dynamics, and mechanics were developed by the game designer in tandem as an integrated package, ensuring that each component was relevant to the game as a stand-alone entity. Conversely, the idea of “fit” or “congruence” is an important component of successful in-game marketing communications, as they are often incorporated into a game after its development and must be situated in such a way as to add to the overall gaming experience. To date, the literature has not examined the importance of functional congruency between marketing communications and the gaming elements in which the advertising is embedded.

Functional congruency is related to the game concept of “flow”, which has been studied in previous research. Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1997; 2012) found evidence that flow is positively correlated with a sense of control, level of arousal, concentration, time distortion, and loss of self-consciousness. These are important components of design that create an optimal user

experience for the gamer. A good functional fit is less disruptive to the game ‘flow’, and by extension, the user experience. Promotions that are aligned with the usual functionality of the game result in greater participation and better receptiveness to the brand’s presence in the game. To that end, functional congruency is defined as the degree to which the promotion operates within the usual game play elements.

Promotions are low in functional congruency when design requires a gamer to interrupt and then navigate away from the playing experience in order to complete a task. Given that social network games incorporate elements of the social network into game play, companies may find benefit in requiring players to visit the brand’s Fan page or an external website in order to complete the game-related task. Using Farmville as an example, some promotions have collected lead information, generated ‘Fans’ on the brand’s social network Fan page, or generated brand purchases. Though these activities can benefit the marketer, they detract from the playing experience. Thus, low functional congruency can lead to lower levels of involvement and greater resentment on the part of gamers.

In contrast, a social network game-based promotion is highly congruent when the promotion utilizes goal-oriented tasks that are aligned with the operational design of the social network game. As an example, a promotion requiring the gamer to visit a digital brand location within the game platform (e.g. a branded Farm in Farmville) would be considered highly congruent, as these activities are normal behaviors in the context of the game. High functional congruency is likely to result in greater participation in the promotion, as it is less obtrusive and requires minimal game flow disruption.

***Aesthetic Congruency.*** The second typology dimension refers to the aesthetic component of the promotion. Unger and Kernan (1983) suggest that leisure is intrinsically motivated as an



end state; players participate in games for the sole purpose of engaging in a leisurely activity. Similarly, Holbrook et al. (1984) posits that hedonic states such as satisfaction, fun, and enjoyment are the essence of play. Thus, branded messaging should also align with players' goals to pursue leisure as an end state.

Aesthetics in the F-A typology closely mirror aesthetics as discussed in the MDA model, although the element of congruency between a promotion and the gamer's motivations for playing poses an additional factor for consideration. Nelson and Waiguny (2012) posit that congruent product placement advertising is better liked by players and thus leads to more positive affect and greater persuasion. Congruent advertising between a brand and the game purpose has also been found to result in greater acceptance of the advertisement messaging (Nelson and Waiguny 2012). A strong fit within the story line can make the audience forget that the presence of the brand is intended to persuade the viewer (McCarty and Lowery 2012), resulting in greater persuasion success and less message scrutiny by the viewer. To that end, aesthetic congruency is defined as the degree to which the promotion aligns with the player's motivations for playing the game.

Advertising within a game has the potential to be highly congruent with these motivations. For example, some social network games (e.g., Farmville) are designed to bring individuals together for fellowship (an aesthetic proposed by Heinke et al.). Farmville encourages gamers to share items with neighbors, and gamers have an expectation that their neighbors will share items in return. A promotion that is high in aesthetic congruency within Farmville will therefore offer something that gamers can share with one another, fostering this sense of fellowship. Farmville also elicits the challenge aesthetic, as many of the game tasks within Farmville can be mastered after being performed a given number of times. A campaign

that offers a limited edition flora (e.g. crop, tree) that may be mastered or fauna (e.g. horse, sheep) that is seen as collectible would fall into the high aesthetic congruency category. Though some research has shown that incongruent advertising leads to greater recall (Lee and Faber 2007), incongruent messaging has also been found to result in lower brand trust and a negative attitude toward the brand (Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004). In the Farmville context, a promotion that generates a sense of competition between gamers would have low aesthetic congruence<sup>4</sup>.

**Typology.** The two dimensions described above create a typology of gamer receptiveness to marketing communications campaigns (see Figure 3.2). We label the four categories created by these dimensions as “Epic Fail”, “Noob”, “Woot”, and “Epic Win”, which focus on the primary affect generated by each cell. The following section explicates the promotional characteristics that define each cell.

*Epic Fail.* The first category, Epic Fail, lies at the intersection of low functional congruency and low aesthetic congruency. An “epic fail” promotion—a grand failure from the gamer’s point of view—does not offer any incremental benefit to the playing experience. In this cell, promotions do not align well with the functional elements of game play nor do they engage the motivations that gamers have for playing. They require the player to navigate away from the usual playing elements (i.e. Facebook News Feed and game platform) to another location in order to complete the promotion (e.g. brand website). From an aesthetic congruency standpoint, receiving an item in the game that can only be used for display purposes enhances neither the fellowship nor the challenge aesthetic of social network games.

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<sup>4</sup> We focus the present research on two aesthetics relevant to Farmville—fellowship and challenge. Multiple aesthetics can blur the lines when a campaign task addresses one aesthetic motivation but not another. The authors acknowledge that there is a gradient between high and low aesthetic congruency such that a promotion tending to a subset of aesthetics falls somewhere along a continuum.

*Noob.* The second category, Noob, lies at the intersection of high functional congruency and low aesthetic congruency. A Noob is a derogatory gaming term defined as “a person who is inexperienced in a particular sphere or activity” (Oxford Dictionary 2013). This typology cell represents promotions that operate within the traditional gaming elements of the game platform and social network, though the game-related offering does not align with the player’s aesthetic motivations to play. Game developers can easily integrate a brand into parts of the game, fulfilling the functionality component. However, the aesthetics component may be overlooked due to a lack of understanding of the gamer’s motivation for playing; such a misstep can result in lower participation and affect toward the promotion and the brand.

*Woot.* The third category, Woot, lies at the intersection of low functional congruency and high aesthetic congruency. Woot is a common gamer term used to express enthusiasm (Oxford Dictionary 2013). Campaigns in this cell aren’t congruent from a functional standpoint, but the campaign offers an exceptional in-game benefit that is perceived as highly valuable to the gamer. Woot-type campaigns require the gamer to complete the promotional task outside of the traditional gaming elements, although the game-related benefits outweigh the temporal and psychological costs of disrupting the game flow for the player.

*Epic Win.* The final category, Epic Win, lies at the intersection of high functional congruency and high aesthetic congruency. Oxford Dictionaries (2013) defines an Epic Win as a grand victory from a gamer’s perspective, as the campaign enhances the gaming experience for the individual by tending to the gamers motivations for playing while also being minimally disruptive to the playing experience. Campaigns in this cell are highly aligned with the gamer’s motivations for playing and the campaign is also well situated in the game structure.

## **STUDY 1**

### **Methodology**

In order to understand gamers' receptiveness to in-game promotions, the first author conducted in-depth interviews lasting 45 minutes – 2 hours each with gamers who currently or had previously played Farmville. Interviews were initially solicited by posting a request to the Wall of the first author's social network. Many friends of the author (both gamers and non-gamers) also posted a solicitation for participation to their social network Walls—which resulted in the request being shared to members of their own social network. While initial participants were part of the first author's personal Farmville neighbor community, additional interviewees were unknown to the author. A total of 18 social network gamers agreed to take part in this research, with eight participants having no prior interaction with the author. Participants are geographically dispersed, residing in South Korea, England, and the United States, though 15 of the 18 participants were located in the US. The mean age of participants is 42. A table of summary participant information is provided in Table 3.1.

We approach our research questions from a qualitative perspective and endeavor to generate scientific propositions about this new phenomenon that can be subjected to further testing and verification. The present research is performed within the context of Farmville, Facebook's most popular social network game, and is based on two years of ongoing fieldwork. The premise of Farmville offers players a digital space where they can plant and harvest a number of crops that require different amounts of time to grow. Farmers are also able to decorate their farms with themes such as Christmas or Halloween, as well as build barns to house animals (e.g. cows, sheep, horses) where they may be bred and shared with neighbors. Farmville follows a freemium gaming model whereby all users are able to play for free, while players who are

willing to spend actual money can purchase “FV Cash” that can be used to purchase coveted, limited edition items (e.g. candy cane horse, lollipop tree) that can be reproduced and shared (by “breeding” or “harvesting” the item) with neighbors. Thus, players who have limited edition items are considered to be very desirable neighbors.

As the first author became more involved in the Farmville culture, behaviors observed within the community aroused an interest in understanding players’ receptiveness to advertising in games. The first author’s involvement in social network gaming suggests a unique emic and etic perspective through which the author can examine both how players’ gaming habits evolve as well as how brands can benefit from social network game affiliation. Previous research has not provided a lens through which to view daily, ongoing online subcultures such as social network gaming. As an initial study, a netnographic approach was used to explore participants’ posting and community involvement behaviors (Kozinets 1998). A netnography is uniquely suited to supplement participant interviews, as interactions within the community exist only in an online context. Through a netnography, the first author was able to identify a number of different activities that gamers perform online for the benefit of themselves and other gamers.

Analysis of interview findings followed procedures outlined for grounded research as described by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Participant interviews were semi-structured and explored a variety of topics related to player motivations and personal impressions of brand related advertising. The author used probes as appropriate to further explicate gamers’ impressions of brand participation in games. Our goal was to understand how gamers perceive advertising in a gaming context. Findings were analyzed in an iterative manner—amassing, coding, comparing, collapsing, and expanding codes—to develop a typology of gamer

receptiveness to in-game advertising. Interview sampling continued until saturation occurred and additional interviews generated no additional insights (Eisenhardt 1989).

### **Findings and Discussion**

How do social gamers view and respond to marketer's brand activities? Many of our informants found value in different aspects of branded product placements within Farmville, but their opinions of brand involvement in social network gaming varied considerably. While some players do not appreciate branded messaging in a game, many believe that a brand's inclusion has the potential to reduce the gamer's cost of playing. In the following sections, we explicate our findings based on the conceptual typology outlined above. For reference, a sample of promotional images related to each promotion discussed may be found in Appendices A-D.

***Epic Fail.*** Promotions in this cell are poorly aligned with the game functionality and do very little to address gamers' motivations for playing. Brand managers typically use this type of promotion to generate traffic to a social network Fan page, increase "Fans," and collect information from prospective customers. Players note the irrelevance of most branded communications within this cell, citing that the costs of participation (psychological, monetary, effort, etc.) are far greater than the value of the promotional item that is being offered.

As an example, AVG, a computer tune-up software company, partnered with Farmville in early 2011 to offer a discounted software package to gamers (Jamison 2011). Gamers who visited the AVG website and purchased the software received an AVG branded bi-plane that could then be used to instantly grow crops. The bi-plane concept was not new to Farmville players, as any player could purchase an un-branded bi-plane for a small amount of coins that could be accumulated quickly through regular game play. Tisha (55, Small Business Owner) discussed her thoughts on the AVG promotion:

I remember seeing the AVG promotion on the loading screen a few months back. I had never heard of AVG before, and wasn't really sure why the company wanted to advertise in my game. They wanted me to go to their website and purchase their software for something like \$10, and they would give a bi-plane so I can stare at their logo on my farm every time I boot up the game? No, thanks. I already had a bi-plane. And it doesn't have a logo on it. Why would I want to spend money to get what I already have?

Tisha learned about the promotion through the announcement screen that is displayed while the game was loading, but was unwilling to navigate to the brand's website to learn more about the product. The logo-embossed plane did not align with Tisha's playing motivations for playing the game, and having to exit the game to visit the website was disruptive to her playing experience.

The Bing search engine campaign in 2010 (Baribeau 2010) is another example of an Epic Fail promotion. In exchange for the gamer visiting Bing's Facebook Fan page and becoming a Fan, the player would receive 3 FV Cash—valued at approximately \$.49 USD. Deborah (43, Army Paralegal) expressed frustration with the Bing promotion:

I did the Bing promotion to get the 3 Farm Cash. I've not used Bing, but I thought for 3 Farm Cash, I'd at least become a fan. But, when I went over to my News Feed to check for any horses my friends had posted, I saw the announcement, 'Deborah and 47 Friends have become a Fan of Bing'. Really? That's why they want me to become a fan? So I can endorse their product to all my friends? I don't think so. I un-Fanned them and won't participate in other campaigns that ask me to be a Fan.

Players, as well as social network users in general, may feel strongly about connecting with the brand in a social network such as Facebook, and by extension, being a spokesperson for the brand (Killian, Hollenbeck, and Hulland 2013). An overt attempt to influence a player can result in the player boycotting the game, the brand, or both. Although the Bing campaign resulted in 400,000 new fan registrations over the course of one day (Eldon 2010), many of our participants suggested that they became a fan, received the gift, and then quickly "un-Fanned" the brand. For example, Sally (51, Meat Cutter's Union) relayed:

I remember that Bing promotion at the bottom of the game—where they put a bunch of usually worthless advertisements. I saw the box that said if I become a Fan of Bing, I'll

get 3 Farm Cash. I thought ... 'I'll become a fan, get the cash, then un-fan them.' I got the Farm Cash from the promotion, but ... why is Bing being so cheap with this promotion? Other promotions offer a lot more Farm Cash for participating. Is 3 Farm Cash all they think I'm worth?

Savvy social network users may choose to become a Fan for the game-related gift and then just as quickly un-Fan the brand, leaving brand managers without any tangible, long term benefit from the promotional campaign. Moreover, the low Farm Cash offering left Sally questioning her value to the company—and also resulted in negative feelings toward the brand.

**Noob.** Promotions that fall into this category are widely viewed by players as an uneducated attempt to persuade players. Promotions in this cell are aligned with the functional aspects of the game, though they offer little aesthetic value to the player. A successful promotion within Farmville should offer a challenging (yet attainable) task for the player to achieve in order to receive the promotional gift. Noob promotions fail to deliver on the aesthetic dimension, leading individuals like Daniel (47, House Husband) to complain that “intrusive advertising campaigns in games are more obnoxious than in movies.” On the other hand, gamers who don't mind this lack of aesthetic congruence are more likely to be responsive to the promotion, as completion of the promotional task requires minimal effort on the part of the gamer.

Many participants recalled the 2010 McDonald's hot air balloon promotion as an example that they found to be of little value to their gaming experience. The promotion asked gamers to visit the McDonald's farm, located in the player's neighbor list. Upon arriving at the McDonald's farm, the gamer clicked 'OK' and received a message indicating that they had been given a hot air balloon with the McDonald's logo on it. While this promotion didn't require the gamer to exit normal game play, neither did the gift enhance the gaming experience. As Samantha (44, Cake Decorator) laments:



The McDonald's thing was ok, but it doesn't carry on long enough. Like, you went [to their farm] one time and you got the balloon. It said I completed a task, but all I did was click ok. I got gifts, but I didn't feel like I did anything to earn the gift. They should've had a task to do in order to get the gift. It wasn't challenging; it was a waste of time.

The minimal requirement on the part of the gamer resulted in Samantha feeling as though the promotion was a waste of time. Further, the promotional item was a farm decoration that offered little benefit with regard to a game related goal.

Because Noob type promotions do not assist the player in reaching her game-related goals, the longer term benefits to brand managers may be minimal. Items that are given to players merely for decorative purposes are usually kept on display for a very short period of time. Players who enjoy decorating their farm often redecorate their digital spaces to reflect approaching holidays. Lindsey (49, Hairdresser) discusses her farm management philosophy:

I enjoy decorating my farm... I change it around each time a new theme is released. Some of my favorite themes were Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day. I do it to give my neighbors something to admire when they come to my farm. But, I also enjoy mastering crops and trees, so I don't allow tons of room to display things that don't help me get my masteries. That's valuable space you know—so I have to decide whether it's more important to decorate or to master a crop.

Later in Lindsey's narrative, she elaborated on her earlier description of decorative themes, with relation to the MegaMind promotion. Shortly before the release of the MegaMind movie in 2010, Dreamworks partnered with Farmville to offer a movie character decoration and a de-wither spray (allows players to bring crops back to life when a player is unable to harvest the crop within the required time). The promotion gifted a MegaMind decoration to gamers in a similar manner as the McDonald's promotion above (i.e., minimal effort was involved). Lindsey continues:

I will participate in the promotions so I can get the items to display, but I always wind up taking them down pretty quick. I mean, how does a MegaMind character fit into my Thanksgiving theme? It doesn't. So, I only display some of the promotional gifts for a

day or two. I wish the promotions WERE the themes—and [Zynga] would let it go on for more than a day or two.

Though Lindsey is willing to participate in the promotion, the promotional gift does not align with the goals Lindsey has identified for her farm—decorative themes and crop masteries. The promotion did not require Lindsey to navigate outside the game to fulfill the requirements of the promotion, but it was disruptive to decorative theme she wanted to maintain. The MegaMind decoration also missed the mark from a fellowship perspective; the decoration did not result in generating any type of sharable item, which could have helped justify keeping the item on display longer.

**Woot.** Promotions in this cell are highly coveted, and players are often willing to go out of their way in order to participate in these promotions. Promotions that fall into this category are poorly aligned with the functional aspects of the game, but are congruent with gamer aesthetics. Our participants appreciated brand managers' efforts to improve the gaming experience by offering rewards that align with the gamer's motivation for playing, despite the functional misfit. The promotions may involve online retailers directing gamers to a particular website to complete a promotional task or offline retailers using in-store displays to highlight the promotion. A considerable number of promotions discussed fell within this category.

One promotion that was mentioned was a Mother's Day promotion with Proflowers. Farmville partnered with ProFlowers, offering players 100 FV Cash in return for a purchase of \$40 or greater on the company's website. Opal (57, Retired) purchases FV Cash for in-game use, but discloses that her daughter is adamantly opposed to spending real money in the game:

My daughter refuses to spend money on the game—and she thinks I'm crazy because I do. But, she will take advantage of promotions offered by companies so she can get Farm Cash. On Mother's Day, I received flowers from her. When I called to thank her, she told me that she did the promotion through Farmville so she also got some Farm Cash. She sends me flowers every Mother's Day anyway, so why shouldn't she also get something

in return, too? And when I logged onto my farm later that day, she had used some of her Farm Cash to buy me a “World’s Best Mom” sign to put on my farm!

Opal’s daughter is unable to justify purchasing Farm Cash simply for her own gaming pleasure, though the ProFlowers promotion gives her an opportunity to justifiably accumulate the coveted FV Cash for her own playing benefit. The ProFlowers promotion was highly aligned with the fellowship motivation of sharing an item, while also offering a substantial in-game benefit to the player. This promotional design can also promote switching behavior from competitors that offer a similar product but lack the in-game benefits.

Brick and mortar retailers can incorporate an in-store component into a Woot promotion, offering additional benefits to both the firm and the player. 7-Eleven convenience stores partnered with Farmville to offer a promotion requiring players to purchase a number of specially marked goods from a 7-Eleven and complete a few in-game tasks. Each in-store item was associated with a different limited edition Farmville item including decorations, trees, and animals—that could be shared with neighbors. Once eight different products had been purchased, the player received 200 FV Cash (equivalent to roughly \$33 US dollars). Lacy (29, Ministry Volunteer) confesses:

We have a lot of 7-Elevens in our area, so that’s where we usually get our gas. I’ll admit it. I’ve bought a larger Slurpee at 7-11 in order to get the Farmville gift. I mean, I was going to get a medium [Slurpee] anyway—so why not get a large and get the Farmville gift, too? And, my husband knows I like to play Farmville, so he’ll intentionally get the Farmville marked stuff for me.

Promotions that incorporate an in-store element can also generate sales from friends or family who may wish to support their loved one’s gaming interests. Moreover, gamers who are unwilling to spend money on the game itself appreciate opportunities to accrue highly valuable prizes. The 7-Eleven promotion aligned with Lacy’s motivation for playing by allowing her to earn a limited edition item for her additional efforts.

Several informants also participated in a Netflix promotion where gamers received 200 FV Cash after signing up for a subscription to Netflix. The promotion offered an enticing amount of Farm Cash, though one participant, Carlie (32, Cake Decorator), shared her negative experience with the promotional fulfillment:

I saw the promotion for Netflix and thought I'd give it a try. 200 Farm Cash can buy a lot of horses in the game, so I thought it was a fair trade—paying \$8 to give Netflix a try and getting the 200 Farm Cash in return. I signed up for the promotion through the link, but never got my cash. I tried calling Farmville, but they said it wasn't their promotion, and I needed to call Netflix. When I called them, they said the deal was handled through a 3<sup>rd</sup> party company and I needed to email the company directly, because it wasn't up to Netflix to fulfill the promotion. When I finally heard back from the 3<sup>rd</sup> party company, they said someone in my household had signed up for Netflix before so I wasn't eligible. No one in my house has ever used Netflix! What a scam! Netflix has lost my business—I'll go with Blockbuster instead.

The promotion was motivating and appealed to Carlie's desire to own limited edition horses. Carlie completed her responsibilities to fulfill the requirements of the promotion, but felt very frustrated when the third party did not fulfill the promotional promise. When promotional elements are not fulfilled as the promotion suggests, negative gamer sentiment can be focused on the brand—regardless of which party is truly at fault.

***Epic Win.*** Promotions within this cell are highly congruent with both the gaming functionality and the gamer's aesthetic motivations. Game-related items resulting from Epic Win promotions align well with gamers' motivation (e.g., incorporating a element that can be shared). This type of promotion can also offer limited edition items that can be mastered. Participants identified two campaigns that exemplify this category.

The first is related to Gagaville. Lady Gaga launched a Farmville campaign shortly before the launch of her “Born This Way” CD in May 2011. Gamers were required to visit ‘Gagaville’—a neighboring farm in the gamer's neighbor list—each day for one week and complete a task. In return, gamers received special edition items each day that were only

available to Gagaville visitors. While some of the items were merely offered for display on the player's farm, other items, such as Lady Gaga themed sheep could be bred and shared with friends. In addition to the in-game benefits, players were able to listen to tracks of the CD via IHeartRadio.com (a Clear Channel company) before the sound tracks were launched to the public. IHeartRadio listeners were also given a number of codes that could be used to unlock additional promotional items inside the game. Both Lady Gaga and Zynga received a considerable number of mentions in mainstream news outlets as a result of such an innovative campaign (Belezina 2011; Hamburger 2011; Rao 2011). Six participants recalled the Gagaville promotion and felt that it was an exemplar for future cross-promotions. For example, Deborah (43, Army Paralegal) gushed:

I was so excited when I heard on the news that Lady Gaga was going to be coming to Farmville. She's always been really 'out there' and I thought she'd be a great match for Farmville. I'm a huge fan of Lady Gaga—I thought it was cool that I would get to hear her album tracks before my friends who didn't play [Farmville]. That was the first thing about the promotion that interested me. When I visited Gagaville, I thought it was REALLY cool! Each day I got a new prize for visiting. I love the sheep on a motorcycle... and my crystal sheep. I'm trying to breed them now to see what kind of sheep I get! My husband missed the crystal sheep, so I'm hoping I can breed one to give to him!

The Gagaville promotion offered a number of rewards both inside and outside the game for interested players. The early song releases were beneficial to gamers who enjoy Lady Gaga music, while the in-game promotional items were valuable to all players—whether they were fans of Lady Gaga or not. Further, the promotional sheep could be bred and shared with other neighbors, tending to the player's aesthetic motivation of fellowship.

A second popular promotion is the Stouffer's campaign that was conducted in March of 2011. The promotion required players to visit the Stouffer's Farm, similar to the Gagaville promotion described above. In return for providing a helping hand on the Stouffer's farm, the

player received a Mac-n-Cheese tree that could be mastered by harvesting the tree a given number of times. James (36, Manager) recalls:

I'm a tree collector, and I like to try to get all the masteries I can. I visited the Stouffer's farm and got the Macaroni tree. I really like the detail they put into the tree—it looks cool, especially when you have an orchard full of them. The first time I harvested my orchard, I got a sapling to share with my neighbors. One of my favorite neighbors got my seedling, and it grew into a giant macaroni tree!

The multiple levels of promotional items from the single promotion offered unique benefits to gamers. Not only did the initial promotional offering convey valuable mastery benefits, the resulting saplings produced from the trees could also be shared, further enhancing the playing experience.

Though these promotional campaigns may only last for a short while, brand presence in the game is perpetuated through the game-related artifacts that align with the player's motivation for playing. These types of promotions require considerable gaming knowledge and effort on the part of the brand manager, though a successful campaign in this cell can result in substantially greater benefits to the firm. Epic Win promotions ensure that the player is able to interact with the brand long after the promotional campaign has ended. Moreover, the promotional item results in a lasting contribution to the overall game experience. A campaign in the Epic Win cell tends to offer the greatest benefit to both the gamer and the marketer.

## **Discussion**

Our findings support the marketing communications typology as outlined earlier. Promotions that are functionally aligned with the existing game framework (promotion conducted inside the game and/or on the player's News Feed) are likely to result in higher participation and positive reception among gamers. We also found additional support for Nebenzahl and Secunda (1993) in that gamers are receptive to brand inclusion in a game when

the promotional campaign aligns with the gamer's motivations for playing. Highly coveted in-game items can perpetuate the brand's presence long after the promotion by offering the player an ongoing benefit. In the context of Farmville, promotional campaigns that offer unique crop and/or tree masteries or unique animals that can be bred and shared are most desirable.

## **STUDY 2**

### **Methodology**

In an effort to find further support with a broader group of participants, a second study was undertaken to examine the F-A typology framework. The second study was conducted in the context of message board threads that capture a diverse opinion set related to various Farmville promotions. A message board consisting of more than 2 million members who play Zynga social network games was identified; a combination of marketing-related key words (e.g. brand, promotion) and known prior promotions (e.g. 7-Eleven, Stouffer's) were then used to arrive at only those message threads directly related to Farmville promotions during the time frame of September 2009 to July 2012. Message threads that met these criteria were downloaded into a document for further sorting and assessment. A total of 5,451 messages spanning 203 threads were included.

Upon completion of an initial coding of all messages, a single promotion was selected to represent each cell of the F-A typology identified above. The primary characteristics that were used in selecting a representative promotion were the number of comments associated with the promotion and the first author's familiarity with the promotion. The chosen promotions were those of AVG software, Farmers Insurance, 7-Eleven Convenience Stores, and Stouffer's. A total of 3,087 messages contained in 65 threads were included in the analysis. Summary information for each of the promotions studied in depth here can be found in Table 3.2.

The coding process identified a number of themes related to the two typology axes—functional congruency and aesthetic congruency. A search of related Farmville websites (e.g. FarmvilleFreak.com) was utilized to gain a nuanced understanding of relevant promotional components. A number of themes emerged as the dataset was coded, and these were later merged into broader, more general categories of information (Spiggle 1994). The analysis was hermeneutic and iterative, and evolved using a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Table 3.3 includes a description of the coding categories. Overall, 32.3% of the 3,086 promotional messages associated with the selected promotional campaigns were discarded due to irrelevance with the purpose of our study. The final data set consisted of 2,090 messages. A count of messages relevant to each category can be found in Table 3.4.

In order to strengthen reliability of the findings, two independent coders were employed, one for each of the two the largest promotions—7-Eleven Convenience Stores and Stouffer's. A total of 2,569 comments across the two promotions were dual coded. The maximum percentage of disagreement was with reference to messages coded as unrelated to the present study. Disagreements between coders were resolved through discussion and explanation of relevant gaming practices. Table 3.5 illustrates the percent of agreement between the author and second coder for each dual-coded campaign. Due to the relatively high level of agreement for the two dual coded promotions, we felt confident using only the first author's coding for the remaining 517 messages representing the remaining two promotions (AVG software and Farmers Insurance).

## **Findings**

Gamers are willing to participate in promotions that require the player to exit the game in order to complete the task, though the perceived additional aesthetic benefits must be greater



than those of promotions that are completed within the context of normal game play. The remainder of this section is organized to explicate the message board findings related to each typology cell. Please refer to Appendices A-D to view promotional images associated with each campaign.

***Epic Fail [AVG].*** Comments regarding promotions that fall into this particular cell are sparse and mostly associated with early promotions conducted in Farmville. The AVG campaign contains the greatest number of comments of all Epic Fail-type promotions, though the overall number of comments is still relatively small. These comments indicate that players were skeptical of the promotion, which was poorly aligned with the gamers' motivations for playing. For example, *Astroasis* resents the promotional requirement to purchase a product in order to receive an in-game benefit, and also exhibits concern that the company is just trying to take advantage of the player base without offering anything of value in return. This perception was exacerbated by the fact that the AVG promotion required players to visit a special website in order to purchase the product, and in return offered players two items that could easily be attained without the promotion for little or no additional money. Thus, the effort required on the part of gamers to fulfill the promotion considerably exceeded the perceived benefit.

When AVG realized that the promotion as originally designed offered little motivation for players to purchase their software, the instagrow feature was combined with a double mastery offering from Farmville (two mastery points rather the single point that is usually accrued each time a crop is harvested), which in turn increased the value of the promotion for players who were focused on mastering crops and trees. However, a small number of message board participants complained that the promotional bi-plane was not received in the game. *FarmerKendessa* questioned:

Has anyone purchased the product from AVG and not received their plane? I bought their product ... but have been unable to receive the plane. Their customer service people are idiots too!! I explained the exact problem and they kept e-mailing me that they didn't understand and that it's a Farmville problem. Very frustrating and completely unprofessional!!

When firms run promotions with third parties, it is important that the front line customer service employees are aware of the promotional components. Players are often skeptical of promotions as a result of early promotional experiences with Farmville that resulted in players spending real money without receiving promised game-related items in return. Front line employee awareness of promotions can allay player concerns that the promotion is fraudulent and allow the firm to direct the gamer to the appropriate department for resolution of any complaints.

*Noob [Farmers Insurance]*. The Farmers Insurance promotion was chosen to represent the Noob category, as the promotional offering did not offer a highly motivating in-game benefit but did fulfill the functional congruency requirement. The 2010 Farmers promotion offered all US-based players a blimp (similar to the real life Farmer's Insurance blimp) and 10 days of crop withering protection. A central premise of the Farmville game requires that gamers plant and harvest crops at a given time; otherwise, crops will wither and must be plowed over, resulting in the farmer forfeiting coins and mastery points associated with the crop. With regard to the Farmers Insurance promotion, *DeborahBarber* suggests:

BTW [By the way] my crops never wither cause I make sure they don't. I already have fake insurance, and that would be me... I'm always here on time to get my crops.

Comments such as this illustrate why the Farmer's campaign may be classified as a Noob campaign. The campaign parallels the role of an insurance company in real life—protection in the event that something unexpected happens (e.g. the player is unable to harvest her crops on schedule), though the promotional benefit of crop withering protection does little to enhance the playing experience for the vast majority of players who diligently manage their lives around their

harvesting schedule. Thus, participation in the Farmers Insurance promotion did not offer useful benefits to the majority of the player base. The convenience of completing the task in-game resulted in a high number of players completing the promotional requirement, even when the promotional item was of little value. *FrontierFranny* shares, “I would gladly give away my... blimp thing that I don't need. It's fugly.”

A considerable number of Farmers promotion comments shed light on the issue of conducting a national promotion within an international game. The Farmers Insurance promotion was announced via the Farmville splash screen (a screen that is displayed to the player while the player's farm is loading). Players worldwide viewed the same splash screen, generating considerable interest in the promotion. However, when the promotion was launched, a number of both US and international players were upset that the promotion had included some players while excluding others. Non-US players who were ineligible to participate in the Farmers Insurance promotion were given a mystery box—an item of very little value to players. *HazyDayz* criticizes:

You at least acknowledged it in the game by offering a 'consolation' prize to those players who weren't able to participate, but seriously, a mystery gift? It would have been better to not have offered anything at all that to suggest we accept such a petty trinket as that. A suitable compensation should have been made.

The data set included 51 message board comments related to the insulting value of the mystery box in lieu of the Farmers Insurance blimp. The frustration over excluding a portion of the player base was not limited to those who were unable to participate in the promotion. *AlisonLou* questions the short sighted nature of excluding some players:

You know, it is kind of lame everyone didn't get the blimp. I'm \*guessing\* the bulk of the players are based in the US, but a lot of us have non-US neighbors whose farms we visit. If they're trying to advertise and get some visibility for their product, it would make sense for everyone to get the blimp. I know there are a lot of people who are unhappy about not getting the blimp and I am truly sorry you're getting the short end of the stick.

The fellowship aspect of the game facilitates the development of friendships, oftentimes with players in other countries. Exclusion of players in different countries can create a rift among the player base. Though the promotional item was poorly aligned with the aesthetic motivations of game play, both included and excluded players were offended that a portion of players were left out. Such mistakes can undermine the very essence of fellowship within social network games, leading both the target and excluded segment with ill feelings toward the firm.

**Woot [7-Eleven Convenience Stores].** The promotion with 7-Eleven Convenience Stores generated the greatest number of comments of all the promotions discussed on the message board. In contrast to the previous two promotions, a considerable number of messages indicated a willingness to purchase in-store items in order to receive game related benefits. The limited edition items that were associated with each in-store item, coupled with the value of the uber-gift (200 FV Cash upon completion) resulted in considerable interest among players. *Birdie2* offers:

I hadda eat some really crappy vanilla ice cream! Never would have bought it otherwise ... It was definitely an incentive to get me to buy something I never would have, otherwise. Sandwiches were better than expected, fruit cups were good, coffee sickeningly sweet, soda is soda... so I thought the 7-11 promo was great for all (just wish I didn't have to blow most of my 200 uber cash reward trying to get the white spotted owl)....

The 7-Eleven promotion was able to generate sales of products that the player may not have otherwise tried. The uber-gift (200 Farm Cash) offered an additional bonus, allowing *Birdie2* to seek out a coveted item—the spotted owl—in the mystery game (players pay 20-30 Farm Cash and receive a mystery, limited edition item). *Birdie2's* comments reflect a large portion of the positive comments related to the promotion. Still, the in-store aspect of the 7-Eleven promotion uncovered a number of issues related to the promotional execution, such as excluding

international and domestic players, problems locating participating stores and/or items, and promotional redemption issues.

Similar to the Farmers Insurance promotion, some players were quite upset to be excluded from participation the 7-Eleven promotion. The 7-Eleven promotion was limited to US and Canadian players (excluding Quebec), though 7-Eleven stores could be found in other countries. As an initial work around, international players purchased game-related 7-Eleven codes on Ebay and entered the codes on the redemption website in order to receive the promotional items. Less than two weeks into the promotion, 7-Eleven took a drastic step of restricting the website—disallowing any international IP address from accessing the redemption website. *Echoecho* protested:

Honestly, this is a SOCIAL game and as that, it should be a game where you share things like this. I buy LE [Limited Edition] cows so I can share their babies with my neighbors... Sharing is a big part of this game. If the promo can't be worldwide, which is understandable, why lock people out that are willing to give 7-11 Dollars for the items. I really feel for people that collect the cows or want to master ALL the crops and are locked out of this because they aren't located in the targeted market. This being a social game, I feel very uncomfortable having no legitimate way to help my neighbors that are a bit more of a spin on the globe.

Advertising promotions that exclude some while including others are highly disruptive to the fellowship nature of social network games. Players who have developed bonds with overseas neighbors feel a sense of guilt or obligation to help their neighbors where possible. The masterable nature of some products caused additional frustration to players who were excluded from the promotion. *Kevstor* suggests:

In the future, the damage could be kept to a minimum if they don't include a current collectible (horse/cow/sheep, etc) or masterable crop/tree. While people still may be cranky about missing out, there would be nowhere near the rage, as no one misses out on a mastery or has their collection broken up.

The 7-Eleven promotion also created issues for players within the US, as many players do not live in close proximity to a 7-Eleven store. Thus, the exclusivity of this promotion was considerably greater than even the Farmers Insurance promotion of the previous cell.

*DeborahBarber* posts:

I actually would have participated IF I had had ANY 7-11 STORES ANYWHERE NEAR ME. This is another reason why I really dislike these promotions. They are only for some and not for all and it's really not a fair deal at all.

Logistical issues were not limited to locating a store within a reasonable distance to the player. Players also noted difficulty in locating all of the included promotional items.

*Bluebeetle37* shares her frustration:

People forget that Canada got screwed over in this promotion. The 7-11's near me are carrying only 4 items plus the giftcard, which still isn't enough to get the uber gift. So it was set up that Canadians cannot get the uber gift.

7-Eleven Convenience Stores are independently owned and operated. As such, the decision as to whether to participate and what items to purchase were determined by individual store owners. Thus, stores within the same city may choose not to carry the same items, or may carry a limited number of each item, resulting in greater difficulties to players attempting to locate the items. Savvy store owners, interested in moving product, viewed the Farmville promotion as a valuable tool to increase sales of slow moving product. *DDR496* cautions:

There is also the problem of 7-Eleven employees applying stickers redeemable for a sandwich cart to any item in the store. I asked the employee if he had the fruit cup. He gave me a puzzled look and said that he did not. Then he pulled out a roll of stickers and put one on a no-name label fruit cup. I purchased the item believing that the code would result in a persimmon tree. It turned out to be a sandwich cart. The guy went sticker-happy affixing stickers to bags of candy, chips, and apparently everything else that he wanted to move quickly. I am just trying to get a persimmon tree.

The final logistical issue that was uncovered in is related to a concern with codes being unusable.

*Farminggirl* explains her experience:

Horrible customer service! I have 6 invalid codes now—ice cream, big gulp and water. 7-11 will not honor the codes even with the store and receipt #. I guess it's just more sales for 7-11 to get a good code. Oh and by the way, when you get a Slurpee, big gulp, or ice cream...dig way back for the cups or ice cream because people are going in and taking pictures with their phones so when u go to enter them they are already used. The store by me has caught 5 people this week doing that.

A considerable number of message posts shared similar stories of codes that were invalid when entered into the 7-Eleven website for redemption. Codes for certain items were printed in easily accessible locations (e.g. bottom of container), and thus allowed individuals access to the code without purchasing the item. Unsuspecting individuals who later purchased the item were disappointed to learn that their codes were already used, and the convenience store chain was often unwilling to compensate the player with the item. Some of the codes were printed on items using a dot matrix printer, resulting in many individuals ‘guessing’ at the codes when inputting them into the redemption website. If too many guesses were made, the individual was locked out of the website for 24 hours. The 7-Eleven promotion offered a number of unique, coveted items to entice players to participate; however, the in-store execution of the promotion left many players frustrated. The desirability of the promotional items were much better aligned with the player’s motivations for playing, making players all the more frustrated when they were unable to satisfy the promotional requirements.

***Epic Win [Stouffer’s].*** The messages related to Stouffers promotion were overwhelmingly positive with regard to the in-game offering of a Mac-n-Cheese tree that could be mastered. *FarmerPika* proclaimed:

I don't live in the US and never got the promo, but I was lucky enough to get a Mac and Cheese tree from a neighbor's post. After some breeding, I now have 4 mac and cheese trees. I'm ecstatic.

The ability to harvest and share trees allows players to accumulate multiple trees and earn mastery points more quickly than if they were only allowed a single tree; thus, the harvesting and

sharing feature of the promotional tree enhanced the playing experience. The Stouffer's campaign is high in functional congruency, as the promotion was conducted solely within the context of the game, allowing players to conveniently participate in the promotion with minimal game disruption.

The Stouffers promotion was also restricted to US residents, resulting in comments from both US and international players regarding exclusion. However, duplication of the trees allowed US players to share the seedlings with other players. The US-based players appreciated the unique promotional tree that offered a mastery element, but the coveted promotion did result in frustration from the standpoint of the international players who were excluded.

Several message posts indicate that players wrote to Nestle (Stouffers' parent company) to express outrage. *Retitil* announced, "I've just emailed Nestle and let them know that since I am not good enough to have a promotion available to me in Canada, they are not good enough to spend my money on." Shortly thereafter, on the same day, Stouffers posted a message on their Facebook Fan page, "we hear you and all of the other FV fans. Please know that we are working on a solution. Stay tuned." On March 10, the Mac-n-Cheese tree was released to all players worldwide.

## **Discussion**

Study two finds further support for the importance of aligning the promotional offering with the motivational goals of the player. Players are more likely to participate in promotional campaigns that are conducted within the context of normal game play, though the in-game promotional item should offer a component that is related to the player's motivation for playing (e.g. sharing items, mastering a tree or crop). Players appreciated promotional items that create goals within the game (e.g. mastery) or allow the player to share the item with others, and were



therefore more likely to keep the item on display for a longer period of time. Decorative promotional items do not fit with the game aesthetic, and are often met with frustration from players.

The second study also found that players are generally more vocal with regard to violations of expectations related to functional congruency than aesthetic congruency. We identified a considerable number of comments related to promotion implementation issues. One issue that was raised in each promotion is that of conducting a targeted campaign within a game that is played on a global scale. A vast majority of promotions are restricted to a subset of players (most often only US players), though the game is enjoyed by a worldwide audience. This raises interesting implications for firms that do not operate in all countries where the game is available. Gamers who were included in the promotion still felt a strong sentiment that promotional items should be available to all players, given that the context of the game is worldwide. Other functional congruency issues included logistical challenges of successfully executing an out-of-game cross promotion—such as ensuring all retail locations have the promotional products and are prepared to implement the promotion as advertised.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Social network games offer brand managers a unique opportunity to engage with consumers in social networks. Social network games have a captive audience of players willing to spend a considerable amount of money in order to further their playing experience. The social network game developers industry reported \$6.2 billion in revenue in 2012, with 60% of those funds coming from players purchases of in-game virtual items. Brand managers who are able to design promotions that align with the players motivations for playing stand to also benefit from players' willingness to pay for the gaming experience.

Integrating into existing games can be an optimal way to engage an exclusive, highly engaged audience. Social network games offer a unique opportunity for brands to cross-promote, generate sales and up-sales, and increase brand Fans in the context of Facebook. Successful marketing communications requires brand managers to understand the aesthetic motivations of the player as well as functionality of the game in order to design a promotion or message that is able to meet both the gamer's and the brand manager's goals. With each of the discussed promotions, players raised issues with regard to promotional campaigns being limited to a subset of the player population. The friendly nature of social network games suggests that brands should consider promotions that are not restricted to a targeted population. Future research might examine the implications of conducting a targeted campaign in the context of a global marketplace.

Promotions that do not align with a player's motivation for playing the game are likely to be met with resistance and skepticism. Epic Fail campaigns are the least valuable to the gamer segment, and may result in the player ignoring the promotion altogether. When players are being asked to purchase a product in order to receive an in-game benefit, it is important to ensure that the game-related gift offers a unique, valuable item in exchange for the gamer's willingness to purchase a product. Noob campaigns also fit poorly with gamer aesthetics, though players are more likely to complete the task due to the minimal effort required. The convenience of completing the task without leaving the game often overcomes the gamer's objection to the product placement-type inclusion. However, the longer term benefits for the firm (e.g. logo item being left for display for a long period of time) are likely minimal, as the branded offering does little to assist the gamer in achieving her game-related goals. Most in-game advertising campaigns are of a short duration, although campaigns that are high in aesthetic congruency can

generate longer term engagement and more positive affect for the brand. Woot campaigns offer extraordinary game-based rewards that entice the gamer to take additional steps in order to complete the requested promotional task (e.g. visiting a retail location to make a purchase), and thus offer managers substantially greater upside than Noob campaigns. Epic Win campaigns should be viewed as the holy grail of in-game advertising. Promotional items that are well aligned with gamer aesthetics are likely to remain in use long beyond the campaign time frame.

Social network games are a viable marketing communications media alternative that can directly and measurably increase social network traffic and sales for the brand. With traditional marketing tactics, firms are rarely able to directly attribute sales to a particular activity, as many initiatives are often conducted simultaneously. In contrast, social network game promotions allow marketers to directly track gamer response to the promotion. Perhaps the greatest advantage of social network games is related to the real-time information that is generated from in game promotions. As was illustrated with both Stouffer's and AVG, brand managers and game developers are able to tweak promotions in response to issues that arise in the execution phase of the promotion. This level of flexibility is rarely afforded to marketing initiatives conducted in other contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

Every game has its own culture, and brand managers would be short sighted to believe that a one size fits all approach is likely to be successful (Hemp 2006). Understanding the functional and aesthetic nuances of each game as well as the associated game culture can help brand managers to develop a marketing communications message that is well received by players. Promotions that are conducted within the traditional functionality of the game environment generate higher levels of participation; however promotions that are outside of the

usual game functionality can also result in high levels of participation when the game related benefit is substantial.

Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004) suggested a variety of aesthetics that may be applicable under various circumstances. Games that engage multiple aesthetics can be more challenging from a promotion incorporation standpoint. Promotions that are able to engage all motivations simultaneously are well-received by players, and should be the primary goal of a promotion. Brand managers considering social network games as a marketing communications tool may be well served to spend some time playing the game or identify an individual who is well versed in the game of interest as well as the firm's promotional goals. Engaging known players in the promotion development process can help brand managers to achieve an Epic Win for both the gamer and the firm by designing a promotion that appeals to many motivations of the players simultaneously.

**Table 3.1: Participant Demographics, Study 1**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Samantha	44	F	TN	Cake Decorator
James	36	M	KY	Manager
Tisha	55	F	TN	Small Business Owner
Maggie	30	F	GA	Student
Opal	57	F	OR	Retired
Jeremy	55	M	GA	Pastor
Daniel	47	M	Korea	House Husband
Sally	51	F	NJ	Meat Cutter's Union
Penelope	22	F	PA	Student
Lisa	61	F	TX	Retired
Ken	35	M	TN	Customer Service Rep
Deborah	43	F	Korea	Army Paralegal
Racquel	29	F	UK	Stay at Home Mom
Lindsey	49	F	TN	Hairdresser
Martha	59	F	CA	Teacher
Valerie	34	F	GA	Teacher
Lacy	29	F	MI	Ministry Volunteer
Carlie	32	F	GA	Cake Decorator

**Table 3.2: Promotion Summary Statistics, Study 2**

<b>Typology Cell</b>	<b>Representative Campaign</b>	<b>Number of Threads</b>	<b>Number of Comments</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Epic Fail	AVG	2	52	34
Noob	Farmers Insurance	7	465	227
Woot	7-Eleven	48	1,769	918
Epic Win	Stouffer's	8	800	330
<b>Total</b>		<b>65</b>	<b>3,086</b>	<b>1,509</b>

**Table 3.3: Coding Category Definitions**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Unable to Complete Promotion	The individual indicates a technical or logistical issue in completing the promotional campaign.
Received Items	The individual indicates they received the items, even after difficulty or finding other workarounds.
US	The individual resides in the US.
International	The individual does not live in the US.
Other Functional	If the comment discusses something else that has to do with fulfilling the promotional requirements, but it wasn't captured in the previous categories.
Sharing with Others	Comment related to sharing items in game with others.
Value of Deal	Comment references the value of the deal with reference to enhancing the playing experience (either good or bad).
Other Motivations	Comment discusses a person's reasons for playing or enjoyment received from playing, but isn't captured in the other categories.

**Table 3.4: Summary of Categorical Counts and Percentages by Promotion**

	<b>Epic Fail AVG</b>		<b>Noob Farmers</b>		<b>Woot 7-Eleven</b>		<b>Epic Win Stouffers</b>	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
<b>Functional Congruency</b>								
Unable to Complete Promotion	3	14.3%	52	29.5%	735	61.5%	121	17.4%
Completed Promotion	4	19.0%	12	6.8%	295	24.7%	69	9.9%
US Resident	0	0.0%	11	6.3%	158	13.2%	39	5.6%
Non-US Resident	0	0.0%	55	31.3%	291	24.3%	342	49.1%
Other Functionality	1	4.8%	7	4.0%	142	11.9%	13	1.9%
<b>Aesthetic Congruency</b>								
Sharing	0	0.0%	1	0.6%	184	15.4%	79	11.3%
Value	14	66.7%	51	29.0%	49	4.1%	105	15.1%
Other Aesthetic	2	9.5%	20	11.4%	82	6.9%	101	14.5%
<b>Total Comments</b>	<b>52</b>		<b>465</b>		<b>1,769</b>		<b>800</b>	
<b>Unrelated</b>	<b>31</b>		<b>289</b>		<b>573</b>		<b>103</b>	
<b>Total Relevant Comments</b>	<b>21</b>		<b>176</b>		<b>1,196</b>		<b>697</b>	



**Table 3.5: Summary of Agreement Statistics for Dual Coded Promotions**

**Percent Agreements**

**7-Eleven      Stouffers**

**Functional Congruency**

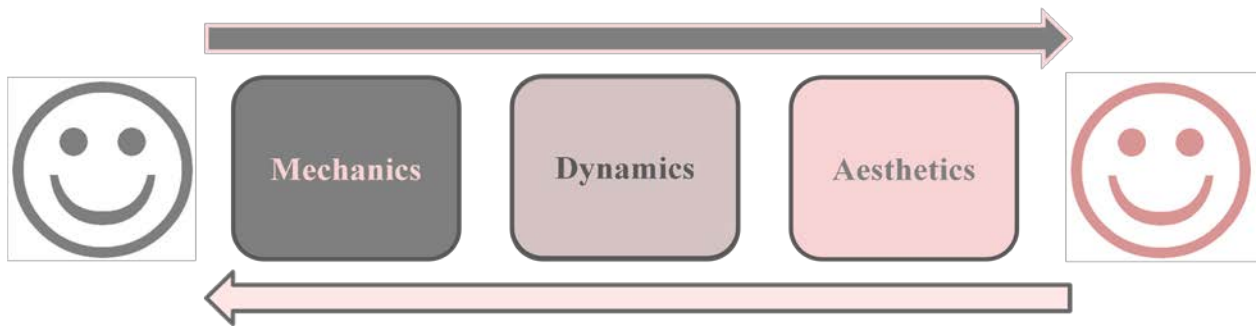
Unable to Complete Promotion	80.2%	85.9%
Completed Promotion	90.6%	94.0%
US Resident	94.3%	94.5%
Non US Resident	92.2%	84.4%
Other Functionality Issues	84.9%	98.4%

**Aesthetic Congruency**

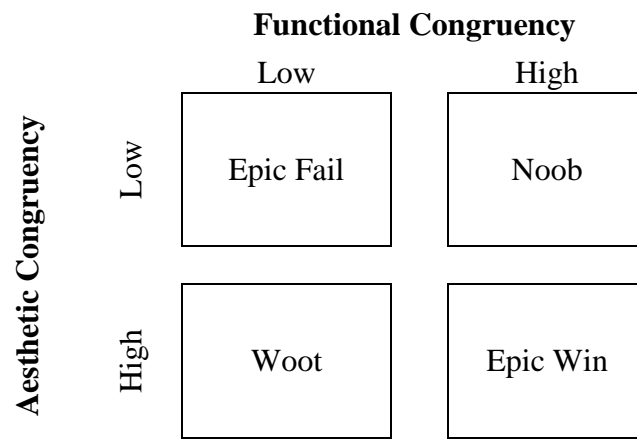
Sharing	95.1%	94.1%
Value of Deal	97.7%	88.2%
Other Aesthetic Motivations	95.9%	89.6%

**Table 3.6: Descriptive Information for Message Board Participants Referenced in the Text**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Date Joined</b>	<b>Total Posts</b>	<b>AVG</b>	<b>Farmers</b>	<b>7-Eleven</b>	<b>Stouffers</b>
alisonlou	June 2009	189		1		
astroasis	June 2010	900	1	1		
bluebeetle37	April 2010	265		1	5	
birdie2	June 2010	64			1	
ddr496	September 2009	278			1	
deborahbarber	July 2009	3,694		2	1	
echoecho	January 2010	285		1	1	1
farmerkendessa	March 2010	3	1			
farmerpika	December 2010	77				1
frontierfranny	June 2010	100		2	1	
hazydayz	May 2010	1,214		4		1
kevstor	September 2009	856			1	2
retiti1	February 2010	173			1	1



**Figure 3.1: MDA Framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck 2004)**



**Figure 3.2: Marketing Communications Typology**

## CHAPTER 4

### A Managerial Perspective of Social Media: Managing the Tension Between the Need for an Integrated Communications Approach and Consumers' Need for Personalization<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Killian, Ginger. To be submitted to *Business Horizons*.

## **ABSTRACT**

Although social media has become a source of interaction between consumers and their favorite brands, surprisingly little academic research has sought to understand how brand managers incorporate social media into the overarching marketing communications strategy. In this essay, the author conducts case studies with both managers and agency personnel responsible for making social media decisions, in order to understand how managers incorporate social media into their firms' marketing communications strategies. Six in-depth interviews inform the agenda, their interpretations guided by participants' wealth of experience in the digital communications industry. Findings offer preliminary insights into the ways in which brand managers position social media within the firm and utilize social media as a tool to better understand and address customer needs.

## INTRODUCTION

The digital age has modified consumers' expectations of branded communications. Prior to social networks, mass media communication channels such as TV and radio allowed brand managers to 'speak to' customers (Hoffman and Novak 1996). However, the proliferation of social media has instigated a revolution in the communications field, resulting in consumers expecting the brand to 'interact with' them in a medium where the consumer controls every aspect of the conversation—the timing, the channel, and the content. The viral nature of social media offers a great opportunity to brand managers who wish to gain positive traction through word of mouth; unfortunately for brand managers, this same word of mouth can be detrimental to the brand image when consumers feel they have been mistreated. The perils of customer service missteps are frequently shared on the evening news and passed around in social media channels. For example, Dave Carroll's *United Breaks Guitars* video went viral on YouTube, making the fledgling singer an overnight sensation while simultaneously vilifying United Airlines, who refused to pay for damage the airline caused to his guitar (Bernoff and Schadler 2010). Another example is that of the hijacked Twitter account of Best Buy CEO Brian Dunn, which proclaimed "I've been having a lot of great sex lately"—a tweet that went out to 5,000 of Dunn's followers (Dunn 2010). These parables, whilst illustrating the power of word of mouth in a social media context, have also led brand managers to question how to protect a brand's reputation when a single poor experience can become an overnight viral sensation.

Firms have traditionally placed media management into silos, with responsibilities distributed to different departments. Paid media encompasses distinct purchased media such as TV, radio, and print and are typically handled by the creative department or advertising agency. Owned media came about with the internet and includes properties such as the company website

and search engine optimization; these media are often managed by the information technology group or the marketing department. Finally, earned media such as public relations and press coverage are almost always assigned to the public relations department. Though these media are often handled in different departments, from the consumer's perspective they work collectively to create an overall brand image. Traditionally, employees have been able to distinguish their role within the overall communication picture and effectively integrate their piece of the puzzle. However, the evolution of social media has blurred the lines between paid, owned, and earned media, and it has lessened the control over messaging for all departments within the organization. Making company owned information available for consumer use in social channels offers a unique set of challenges in determining how to manage the brand image. As brand managers strive to maintain a cohesive presence and protect the brand, they must maintain a delicate balance between protecting its image, facilitating new customer touch points, and encouraging deeper connections between the consumer and the brand.

An early stance taken by some brand managers was to avoid a brand presence on social media altogether—suggesting that if customers do not have a place to vent online, it simply won't happen (Ramsay 2010). However, as social media continues to dominate both consumer conversations and pop culture, many brand managers are recognizing the fallacy of such a naïve approach and now seek ways to accentuate their brand's positioning in social channels while minimizing any negative impacts of using social media. This transition has not come without difficulties, however, as many corporations aren't accustomed to allowing others to speak freely on the company's behalf (Bernoff and Schadler 2010). Early branded social media communications were often crafted and sent to the firm's legal department for approval prior to being shared online, though the personal nature of social media suggests that having a lawyer



pre-approve communications in social media is tantamount to requiring a lawyer be present for a conversation with a friend. The lawyer's presence may in fact do more damage than if the manager allowed his or her own instincts to guide the conversation. The present research seeks to fill a gap in academic literature by understanding how social media are being incorporated into a firm's overarching marketing communications strategy to facilitate a deeper connection between the customer and the brand.

The author approached this research endeavor with a clean slate, allowing her to fully examine the context of each description and gain a better understanding of each manager's perspective. The structure of the remainder of the paper is organized to address the methodology and then organize the findings around the main themes identified by participants. The discussion section examines the implications of managing a firm's social media strategy. The paper concludes with future directions and limitations of the present study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) suggest that "interpretive researchers recognize that as meanings are formed, transferred, and used, they are also negotiated, and hence that interpretations of reality may shift over time as circumstances, objectives, and constituencies change," a comment that is reflective of the methodology underlying this research project. Both the author's epistemological approach to knowledge construction and her limited understanding of how brand managers develop social media strategy are reflective of a traveler's approach to gaining insight into the interviewee's perspective (Kvale and Brinkman 2008). In order to understand how managers are incorporating social media into the communication strategy, the author approached each case study seeking to examine these questions from the perspective of

the manager. This allowed the author to gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges involved in creating an engaging social media communications strategy.

Interviews were semi-structured, enabling follow-up questions that probed instances of interesting or unique experiences. Appendix E presents the list of initial questions used to loosely structure the managerial interviews. Interviews were conducted to identify the types of social media that the participant's firm utilizes, understand the structure of the department where social media strategy is developed, investigate the goals and objectives for the different types of social media, and understand the participant's view of the future of social media.

Participants were identified and recommended by business contacts of the author. The author contacted the participants through email and requested participation in the study in order to gain a better understanding of firms' perspective of social media. No compensation was offered in exchange for participation. The criteria for participation required that the individual be responsible for the oversight of a firm's social media strategy for a minimum of six months prior to the interview. Six participants were selected for in-depth interviews based on self-reporting that they met the criteria (Roulston 2010). Interviews lasted between one and two hours. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by the author using Express Scribe, and the transcripts were then verified by the author by listening to the audio recording while reading the transcript (Roulston 2010). A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was then conducted by condensing passage meanings to themes that could be compared between participants (Kvale and Brinkman 2008; Roulston 2010). This was done through an iterative process utilizing Atlas.ti software, whereby themes were identified and coded in each transcript and then compared between transcripts and recoded (Roulston 2010). Thematic findings are discussed below. Summary data for each participant can be found in Table 4.1.

## **FINDINGS**

As the participants described the operational details of their respective firms, patterns emerged as to the ways in which the participants develop and implement social media strategy. Similar patterns were revealed in each participant's social media philosophy, though the industries represented in the study vary considerably. Three primary themes were identified: (1) the need for social media strategy integration with other components of the firm's communications strategy, (2) the need for a consistent presence on selective social media platforms, and (3) the need for brand messaging to feel personally crafted for the individual audience and the chosen social media platform. Figure 4.1 illustrates these three primary themes.

### **The Need for Integration**

Integration is not a new concept in the realm of marketing communications. However, social media adds an additional layer of complexity in managing a brand image—the consumer is in control of the conversation. Adam (eyeglass industry) discusses how his firm incorporates social media in the overall communications plan:

...part of the goal we have is that we're basically following a process and a cadence around our marketing campaigns. And the basic essence of that is we come up with a big idea... and then allow the various functions within the marketing team to [identify ways] they can support that. And one of those will always be a social channel and how are we are tying them together... Because what you want to do is support and strengthen the overall campaign based on how everything fits together.

Social channels facilitate customer engagement, though this does not suggest that social media channels should be the only part of the firm's communication strategy. Many brand managers view social channels as an additional, complimentary tool in the customer dialogue.

Historically, managers have utilized different media to achieve the same objectives (i.e. build awareness, increase purchase intent) in an effort to move customers through the decision funnel. According to Edelman (2010), the decision funnel begins with a customer considering

many products that may fulfill a need and then narrowing the decision set using various criteria until a single choice remains. Edelman goes on to suggest that in the digital age, managers may better utilize advertising dollars by targeting certain media to match the stage in the consumer journey. Participants acknowledge that social media strategies should work in concert with existing marketing communications in order to move customers through the decision channel in relevant ways. Social media channels serve a distinct benefit separate from that of existing traditional media channels. Ray (transportation industry) discusses his thoughts on utilizing social media to target customers and prospects at critical stages of the buying process:

TV and radio are great for building awareness. It's large, broad stroke branding... and [as we move down the decision funnel] we're filling in different funnels to drive individuals to the [web]site they need... I have this whole row of funnels, if you will, under this big awareness campaign. So I start to see digital playing in those spaces because we can start to target messages that are less expensive and more targeted. We can start to understand where each of these segments is living and what they look at... Now I can start to understand the behavior of each segment and start to layer in our messaging and make that message relevant to each of the target audiences.

Utilizing social media at specific touch points can help brand managers to direct customers and prospects to an online location that matches the consumer's interests and needs. Further, the flexibility of online channels allows brand managers to do this in a much cheaper, more efficient manner. Janna (digital media agency) also emphasizes an integrated approach to incorporating social media and a broader digital component into the overall marketing communications plan:

Sometimes, we'll start with bigger goals and then think about how we're going to execute them. Social may bring an idea to execute against a consumer journey, and we're going to touch this part of it, post purchase, for instance. Right at that post purchase moment, what do we want consumers to do? That is a different place than a TV spot that would maybe be all about bringing a consumer into a journey. So, think about how we might use different media platforms and where it might fall in the funnel. If we look at it like that, it's not just matching luggage. Other times, you have socially led campaigns where other media support it—where social is the focus and everyone else is stepping in to provide matching luggage.

The goals of the communication plan are likely to distinguish which media lead an initiative, although the prevalence of social media use by consumers suggest that the dynamic medium should play a role in every communications plan.

### **The Need for Consistency**

Traditional media allow brand managers to maintain a sporadic presence by scheduling flights of media to coincide with specific firm goals (e.g. increased sales at Christmas). In contrast, social media interactions are driven by the customer and must be available on the customer's terms, aligning with the expectations in which the customer wants to be engaged. Consistency has been studied as authenticity by a number of scholars (Grayson 2002; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Schulman 2000; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006). Leigh, Peters, and Shelton (2006) posit that "authenticity is a consumer perception that occurs through a filter of one's personal experiences". Thus, a consumer's interaction with a brand in social media must be consistent with other brand-related interactions; a mismatch in interactions may leave the customer wondering which interaction represents the true character of the brand.

Brand managers interested in initiating a presence on a social media platform (e.g. Facebook) should understand that such a commitment requires that content be maintained and updated multiple times per week. Participants acknowledge a challenge in maintaining a presence on selected channels. Janna (Digital Marketing Agency) discusses her concerns:

Just because it's a bright, shiny new object doesn't mean you need to play on it. And it doesn't mean that you need to commit to it. Because once you commit to being on that [social media] platform, you're going to build relationships and you have to maintain that content. There's nothing worse than building a [web]page and relationships, and then not maintaining the content. It looks bad for a brand if the last thing that was posted was 6 months ago. Either commit to maintaining content and managing those relationships, or don't start it in the first place.

Caution should be used in committing to a platform, as infrequent maintenance of content may reflect poorly on the firm. Prior to committing to a social platform, brand managers must understand the type of users and the conversations that are being conducted within the platform. Some social platforms are well suited for specific industries. As such, those platforms can create a unique experience that benefits both the firm and the customer. Adam (Eyeglass Industry) discusses the way in which his firm listens to customers via Pinterest in order to inform the firm's future direction:

And we need to be wherever the customer is at the end of the day. We need to be comfortable talking to her wherever she happens to be. So if she's engaged in the dialogue online with Pinterest, we want to be engaging with her in relevant ways—that is the right way...I think the big thing that we look at with our industry is that we've always internally done Look Books of fashion and trend. Our customers, through Pinterest, are doing the same thing. It's a very interesting parallel to how we look at the world. So I think it's facilitating their interests, and setting up their own Look Books is something that we are very interested in and want to participate in and understanding how they are building their own look. Any of the social media should be a two-way street, so we want to give our customers the ability to accessorize their look and feel with Pinterest in a way that defines their personality more uniquely. Universally, we can leverage that same medium to look at how they are accessorizing to help us understand our customers and where they are headed. And make sure that we are in lockstep with the aspirational needs of that group.

Brand managers that are able to quickly develop a strategy for new social media platforms can gain an early foothold in developing relationships with a niche platform's users. However, eagerness should be tempered with caution. Whereas popularity of TV and radio has existed for decades, the popularity of social media platforms is likely to change much more quickly. In May 2008, MySpace represented 74% of social networking traffic, while Facebook claimed only 15% of the market share (Catone 2008). One year later, Facebook visits were double that of MySpace (Cutler 2009). New social media sites, such as Pinterest and Twitter, were nonexistent in 2007, but now represent two of the top 5 social media sites (Dugan 2012). The speed with which a media platform can rise to popularity can also indicate the speed with which it may be replaced.

Thus, brand managers should be cautioned to utilize a number of social channels to build relationships, whilst keeping in mind that it is less important for a brand to be represented on every platform than it is for a brand to be well represented on a few popular platforms that are closely aligned with the firm's strategic goals. The audiences also differ across platforms, though it is important that the audience feel as though they are interacting with the same personality whether it be on Twitter, Facebook, or Pinterest.

In discussing the concept of consistency, participants emphasize that consistency must also extend to the messaging in each platform. Two participants indicate concern that managers should be careful not to portray the brand as *Sybil*—a reference to a movie in which the main actor has three distinctly different personalities. Adam provided a concrete example of how brand managers must speak to different segments while simultaneously remaining true to the brand essence:

We can't afford to be *Sybil* in how customers see us marketing ourselves... For instance, right now I'm talking to you in an academic setting... If I ran into you at a pub somewhere, I would expect you to be authentic to who you are, and we probably wouldn't be having the same type of conversation. But I would expect the continuity to be there. And that fabric of who you are would come out consistently.

Janna (Digital Marketing Agency) describes how her firm approaches consistency in the look and feel of the brand across different media:

Whatever companies are doing, they are going to have a social component. Often times it's matching luggage. This is what our TV spot looks like, this is what our radio ad sounds like, this is what we'll do online. So, we may make a canvas page on Facebook that looks very similar to a print ad. And the customer can click through to the dot com [website] that has a similar activation... matching luggage.

While different media channels can be used to address different buying stages and consumer segments, firms must ensure that the social campaign is aligned with the other media strategies. In practice, social media responsibilities have often been relegated to employees who raise their

hand and volunteer to manage the brand's essence. However, such a strategy may backfire when the volunteer doesn't fully understand the brand's essence (Armano 2011). A firm's social media authors should intimately understand the brand essence and be able to communicate with customers in a manner that aligns with the brand personality.

### **The Need for Customization**

Within social media, consumers believe that a brand must be timely and authentic in interacting with the customer, tailoring messages based on the relationship that the consumer has with the firm (i.e. customer, prospect, Fan). However, the need for authenticity should not overshadow the brand essence that should remain consistent across all customer interactions. Maintaining a central voice across different media and with different customers is no small feat. Smart companies are developing and implementing strategies that allow them the flexibility to be authentic and timely while also remaining true to the brand essence. In contrast to traditional media, social media offers an opportunity to listen and respond to customers in an intimate way that hasn't been possible in the past. Social channels can build a relationship with consumers, though brand managers should be cautioned to remember that social media is a very private space; sales pitches from advertisers are unwanted and may result in backlash from consumers who feel violated. Janna shares her philosophy on developing social media content:

If we entered every relationship with 'I'm gonna try to get you to do something...' we'd be a bunch of lonely people. No one wants to be friends with a bunch of carny barkers... "step right up... let me sell you something".

Orsburn (2012) suggests that brand managers should only spend 20% of the conversation time asking the customer to do something; the remaining 80% should be used to inform, entertain, and interact with customers. Geof (Digital Media Agency) provides a relevant example of the benefit of social media:



You have an advertising medium that allows the customer and brand to have a dialogue, like buying a car. We tell a sales person our problems, wants, needs and pain points, and they try to come up with a solution. The same thing is true with social.

Social media channels allow brand managers to better understand how to meet the needs of consumers, thereby leading to more informed, intuitive product offerings for consumers.

To understand customer motivations, brands are identifying unique, industry relevant ways to engage consumers on social platforms in ways that speak directly to the motivations that consumers have for interacting with the firm. Savvy brand managers are able to customize social media in such a way that the channel offers added value to the customer. Geof shares his experience:

We still want to watch TV with our friends. Nowadays, when I'm watching American Horror Story, I've got Twitter up as I'm watching it. It reminds me of like, in college, when women would get together to watch General Hospital and all talk about it while it's on. Same thing here. People are making hysterical comments while it's going on. Now it's a community of people I don't know, but we all have the same interests. There's still a need for the TV experience. And there's going to be a need for other media. But it's all morphing into one.

Social channels are able to revive older traditions of sharing a TV experience with a community of those who share the same interests, developing a brand community for products that are consumed privately. Further, incorporation of social media such as Twitter into the TV viewing experience can create a more valuable experience for advertisers. In an age of DVR technology that allow users to record a television show and watch at a later time, viewers choose to do so in order to fast forward through commercials. However, when viewers are vested in watching a show in real time, the viewer is also more likely to see commercials between show segments. Many television programs are beginning to incorporate a social aspect into the viewing experience, asking viewers to connect through Twitter or become a Fan on Facebook. The

additional social channel allows viewers the opportunity to comment on the show as it occurs or learn interesting facts that weren't aired with the program.

Sarah (Digital Media Agency) discusses how her firm manages two separate Twitter accounts in order to tailor the messaging based on the follower's interests:

We manage two Twitter handles for [our client]. One is just talking about brand engagement initiatives. We want to take advantage of the different conversations that are happening relevant to brand. That handle is very specific to just brand engagement. No product offers are going through that particular handle. There's another handle that is very offer related. There are people on Twitter that just continuously look for deals. This handle is specifically designed for offer related messaging. We don't want offer related messaging to collide with engagement type messaging. Twitter is a very personal space. People are constantly tweeting and they've got 140 characters to make a statement. You don't want to ruin that real estate by saying "check out [our new product] and get \$10 off!" We use a different handle for that and it goes after a different type of audience.

Creating separate accounts to manage different consumer interests can help brand managers to control the conversation and ensure that the messaging content is on target with the user's expectations. However, the greater the number of social media platforms, the more difficult the task of managing the multiple venues becomes, as the content must be regularly maintained.

Several participants suggest that managers should be cautious in reacting to the opinions that are shared through social media channels. While the channels can offer additional insights into how consumers view a product offering, the opinions shared on social platforms may not reflect the opinions of the majority. Adam discusses his thoughts:

It's always interesting to gain insight into how customers on the extreme are speaking... But you get this extreme perspective of people who really love you or people who really hate you. Those are the ones that are going to have a dialogue by and large....So you always have to take that into consideration. Is this really an extreme view of something or is it something that mainstream would adopt?

Social channels can bridge the gap between traditional media and the firm by developing communities of brand Fans to share the experience. Ray experienced a similar realization and

provided a poignant cautionary tale related to listening and responding to customer complaints in a social channel:

We tend to listen to the loudest voice, and the loudest voice has a much larger representation, although they might not represent the majority. But, there was this big outcry because we were advertising on [a right leaning political program]. Just for fun, I went and looked at who posted. It was people who were fans of [left wing political movements]. I got the strong sense that it was a targeted effort at any brand who was advertising on [the program]. I spoke to my agency, and they saw the same thing happening across other brands who were advertising on [the program]... So we pulled the plug, and we had a lot of people who had been silent now saying, "Why did you do that? All you're doing is caving in. Don't you know that most of us [company employees] listen to [the program]?" There was this backlash for taking action on the vocal minority and the silent majority was now outraged. So now they became visible. They now reach their tipping point and went from silent to vocal because they thought we were caving in.

Ray's example is illustrative of the decisions that many managers face in the age of social media. If a manager chooses to do nothing, those who are vocal can create an issue for the firm. However, if the company does take action, they also risk angering those on the other extreme for caving to the few who are vocal in social media. Further, because many social media sites allow individuals to post anonymously, managers may believe similar comments are being posted by multiple individuals when in fact, one individual is making multiple comments of a similar nature (Patino, Pitta, and Quinones 2012). Managers must listen cautiously and take measured action with regard to social commentary.

Somewhat surprisingly, our research also found that some firms still exhibit caution in incorporating social features into the firm's business model. Isabella (Women's Undergarments) discusses her firm's hesitation to incorporate customer product reviews into the company's website:

One thing that they don't have is product reviews on the website... A lot of [our] products are reviewed on other websites, so I've tried to get approval to put the product reviews on our website, because it's going to be said somewhere else anyway, even if it's not said on our website. And also, this could just be the product review company trying to sell me in, but they say that a product with a negative review will have a higher conversion rate than

a product with no review. Or a product with less than a five star rating will have a higher conversion rate than one with a perfect five stars. Because people don't trust the information they're seeing if it's all positive. It's like [the company] just went in and removed all the negative reviews. I'm sure they'll eventually add product reviews on the website, but it's not an easy thing to manage. If you can come up with a list of things that you don't want people to say, things can get filtered out. But it is tedious and time-consuming. Someone always has to keep their eye on it and make sure something doesn't slip through—or someone has to go in and approve comments so that they can go live. It's a big job for someone. And, we're a small company.

Isabella recognizes that comments are being said elsewhere and the comments have the ability to lead to additional sales; however, her senior management is unwilling to allow product reviews to be incorporated into the firm's website. The risk of damage from a small number of negative comments outweighs the potential benefits from positive comments and additional sales.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present research suggests that integration, consistency, and personalization are vital themes for a successful social media strategy. Brand managers have long understood the importance of integration and consistency in developing a media communications plan, though the concept of personalization adds a dimension of complexity that hasn't been encountered previously. Managers must identify ways to listen and respond to customers in a meaningful way, using a consistent voice across platforms. The differences in implementation across platforms must be subtle—such as responding to a customer inquiry that is posted on a brand Fan page. Those who are responsible for representing the firm in a social space must fully understand the brand essence and ensure that customer communications are representative of the established brand personality. Creating a separate personality in a digital space can seem inauthentic, leaving customers confused regarding the brand's values and essence.

Monumental brand missteps such as the United Breaks Guitars fiasco are becoming fewer, suggesting that managers are learning from public mistakes and developing safeguards to

protect the brand's reputation (Bernoff and Schadler 2010; Coleman 2012). However, Coleman goes on to point out that small gaffes still occur with some frequency. Employees who work closely with a brand develop a tendency towards becoming a 'brand ambassador' and often fail to see how others could feel differently about their company. McDonald's learned this lesson by creating #mcdstories, and then promoting the hashtag as a tool for consumers to share their wonderful McDonald's experiences; the hashtag instead quickly became a collection of horror stories from critics. In this regard, an external agency with social media experience may add value by delivering an objective, experienced opinion before implementing a campaign idea.

In an effort to personalize social media communications, some firms seek to be witty and news relevant, though caution should be exercised in using news related current events to further the brand. Kenneth Cole learned this lesson when public outrage ensued after the chief clothier tweeted, "Millions are in uproar in #Cairo. Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online..." (Ehrlich 2011). The uproar was in fact related to civil uprising unrelated to the clothing line. The company founder and chief executive officer later removed the tweet and posted an apology to his Facebook page: "I apologize to everyone who was offended by my insensitive tweet about the situation in Egypt. I've dedicated my life to raising awareness about serious social issues, and in hindsight my attempt at humor regarding a nation liberating themselves against oppression was poorly timed and absolutely inappropriate."

Firms should be cautioned to do their research before creating an association with trending terms on social media. The public relations firm responsible for CelebBoutique, an online clothing store, noticed the term #Aurora was gaining momentum on Twitter and posted "#Aurora is trending. Clearly about our Kim K. inspired Aurora dress" (Haberman 2012). The company removed the comment when it learned that the hashtag was trending due to a mass

shooting and offered a number of apologies through Twitter. CelebBoutique acknowledged that the public relations group handling the Twitter account on the firm's behalf was located in another country and did not review the #Aurora posts to see why the posts were trending. Had the public relations firm examined the postings, the gravity of the situation would have been immediately apparent.

Social media channels complement other existing media channels by driving user engagement and creating a context whereby users can interact with the brand. Cautionary tales that have guided firms' hesitancy to fully engage customers online is only partially misguided. Social channels can facilitate consumer learning and engagement by directing the customer to the appropriate location to address concerns. Social channels can also be used to bring together brand communities and facilitate shared experiences (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). The online nature of social channels lends itself to allowing brand managers to listen and respond to a greater number and variety of customers concerns.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The present research suggests a number of limitations. The present research is based on the opinions and strategies of 6 individuals who have worked in the digital realm for a number of years. While participants' knowledge base is vast, additional research should seek to gather additional insights from brand managers and digital strategists. Social media is still thought to be in its infancy from a strategic standpoint; new sites and opportunities for firm collaborations with social media are being developed each year. Thus, the evolving nature of social media suggests that the issues that are raised today may be overcome tomorrow, only to be replaced by new issues related to new technologies.

Social media is changing at the speed of light. As social platforms further develop, a number of niches are being created. Sites such as Pinterest allow users to collect and share recipes, pictures, and other ideas; Twitter has cornered the concept of keeping ideas short—limiting users to 140 characters to capture their thoughts; and sites such as Foursquare have taken gamification to a new level by allowing users to compete with one another by earning points for every location the user checks into. Platforms that were nonexistent two years ago now have millions of users. Thus, brand managers must be adept at recognizing the strengths of different platforms and utilizing those platforms to further the customer-brand relationship. Future research should seek to understand the components that allow a specific social media platform to gain traction with the public; “me-too” platforms (e.g. Google+) that offer no comparable advantage over an existing rival have difficulty gaining traction with users.

## **CONCLUSION**

Brand managers have begun to recognize the value of social media platforms in creating an intuitive, responsive brand presence for customers. Whilst the challenges of managing a conversation that is controlled by others may seem daunting, the benefits of listening to the customer far outweigh the potential risks. Customers are willing to share their thoughts and experiences through social media; the knowledge gained from listening to these experiences can help brand managers to develop the next generation product that is highly aligned with consumer needs.

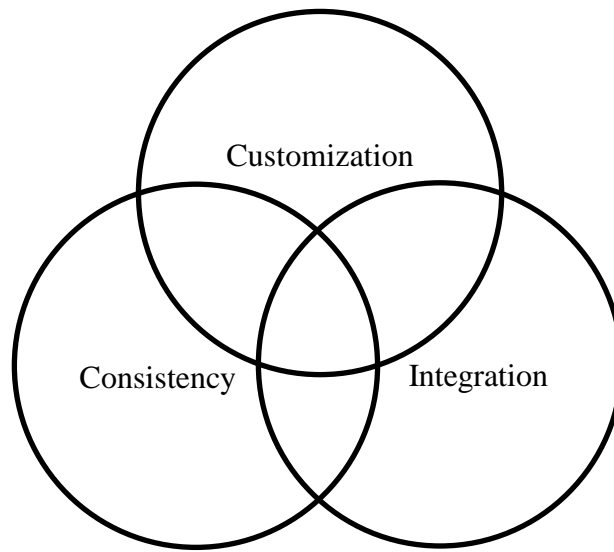
Understanding the nuances of a particular social media platform can help managers to carefully select the platforms that are most closely aligned with the managers’ strategic communications plan, thereby creating a unique opportunity for the firm to interact with consumers in a way that is beneficial for both the firm and the consumer. For instance, Pinterest

offers opportunities for brand managers in industries that are fashion-focused, though the site may not be well suited for the transportation industry. Facebook has become a universal “check box” for firms in the B2C realm. However, the implementation quality of brand Fan pages varies considerably. Prior to developing a Fan page, managers must consider the ongoing management of the brand in the space. Customer questions that remain unanswered are a poor reflection on the brand and can leave customers feeling as though they have been ignored. Likewise, pages that aren’t updated regularly quickly become dated and may create consumer concerns related to whether the firm is fully engaged in the space. A social media communications strategy should step beyond a manager’s desire to be in the space; going social requires greater involvement and responsiveness to consumers on a regular basis.



**Table 4.1: Participant Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Industry Type</b>	<b>Years Experience Managing:</b>	
		<b>Marketing Functions</b>	<b>Social and Digital Channels</b>
Janna	Agency	20	7
Sarah	Agency	14	7
Isabella	Women's Undergarments	5	2
Ray	Transportation	20	8
Geof	Agency	28	4
Adam	Eyeglasses	25	9



**Figure 4.1: Social Media Strategy Findings**

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE STATE AND FUTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

#### **A SUMMARY OF PERSPECTIVES**

Social media was first introduced in the early 2000's and the adoption rate of social media platforms is increasingly gaining momentum. Consumers find value in being able to connect with one another and share their lives and items of interest online. Facebook, currently the most popular social media platform, has permeated society in such a way that users often visit the social network multiple times per day. In many cases, users share major events through social networks instead of contacting people individually. This chapter is structured to review findings from each of the three essays, followed by a general discussion. I then propose an agenda for future research.

#### **Essay 1**

Prior research has found that the focus of social network usage is primarily on self expression, with greater attention given to presenting one's ideal self (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). And, although some studies in psychology indicate that the use of Facebook can enhance social situations for those with low self-esteem by helping them develop a larger network of friends that would otherwise be unattainable for the introverted personality type (Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe 2008; Zywica and Danowski 2008), other studies show that social networking sites like Facebook are having an increasingly negative impact on overall self-esteem (Acar 2008). Individuals often present different facets of themselves to different audiences based

on the circumstances. Given the conflicting findings, my research examined how social media is influencing users' self concept, and more broadly, the types of behaviors employed by social network users in order to protect or enhance the self in a digital space.

I employed a variety of qualitative and interpretive methods over a two year research period to investigate how social networks are exacerbating self presentational concerns. To gain a perspective of action (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), I utilized a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups with journaling techniques in order to triangulate and refine themes using two segments of social network users. In the first phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with a heavy usage segment of Facebook participants—social network gamers. To confirm and refine the conceptualization from phase one, the second phase consisted of two focus groups of K-12 teachers—a segment whose impression management concerns are heightened due to popular press reports, interfering parents, and sensitive school administration.

The primary driver of self-presentation concern varies between the two study groups. The gamer segment is primarily concerned with being a good social network citizen to both gamer and non-gamer friends—each with considerably different expectations. The teacher segment was concerned primarily with the professional repercussions of a negative self-presentation. Though the drivers of presentational concern differ, however, the ego maintenance concerns and mechanisms employed to protect the self were the same for both categories of social network users. Three primary goals were identified by participants with regard to managing self presentation in a social network environment: the need to be respected, the need to feel secure, and the need for acceptance. Users in a social network are continually evaluating the facets of themselves they share as well as how the audience responds to the user's posts; greater (or positive) responses generate feelings of acceptance and belonging whereas an absence of (or

negative) responses can lead to feelings of rejection and isolation. In order to guard against negative effects, social network users employ two categories of self regulation behaviors: self promotion-and self-protection. Our results show a greater use of ego-protecting behaviors as compared to ego-promoting behaviors, illustrative of the importance of guarding oneself against ego threats from others in their online network.

Participants noted two types of self-promoting behaviors that are enacted to manage the tensions associated with impression management: affirmation and affiliation. Participants seek affirmation in order to bolster themselves and be viewed in the most positive light in three primary ways: altruism (conducting activities for the benefit of others), mavenism (serving as a subject matter expert for network connections) and schadenfreudism (viewing others' failings to feel better about oneself). Affiliation can lead to greater outward self esteem, and participants acknowledged valuable affiliations with three types of entities: corporate brands, sports teams, and inspirational organizations.

Participants identified two types of self-protective behaviors used to maintain credibility across a diverse social media audience: structural solutions and self-censoring. Three primary structural solutions emerged from our research: network partitioning (the type of relationship determines which social media platforms are accessible), maintaining multiple accounts (different types of relationships managed through different accounts of same platform—e.g. one Facebook account for personal and one for professional), and utilization of the Facebook grouping function (dividing users into similar clusters of connections and conducting conversations with each group). Our research also uncovered three self-censoring mechanisms: restricting personal information to the public at large (through privacy settings), censoring posting behaviors (refusing to post comments that may be inflammatory to a subset of the

audience), and censoring connections with brands (including both privately and publicly consumed brands).

## **Essay 2**

With the eroding impact of traditional media, brand managers are increasingly turning to alternative marketing communications channels such as product placements in television programs, movies, and games in order to reach the elusive consumer. More than 275 million users play games on social networks, and marketers are turning to social network games as a viable platform for advertising and promotion (App Data 2012). However, social network games operate on a different premise than traditional games, and brand managers must approach inclusion in these games differently. Building upon a model developed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck (2004), I developed a 2 X 2 communications typology of gamer receptiveness to in-game promotional messaging. (The applicability of the framework to marketing communications is broader, but here I focus here only on promotional events.) The two axes of the typology are functional congruency (the degree to which the promotion operates within the usual game play elements) and aesthetic congruency (the degree to which the promotion aligns with the player's motivations for playing the game).

My involvement in social network gaming suggests a unique emic and etic perspective through which I can examine both how players' gaming habits evolve as well as how brands can benefit from social network game affiliation through promotions. Previous research has not provided a suitable lens through which to view daily, ongoing online subcultures such as social network gaming. The present research is performed within the context of Farmville, Facebook's most popular social network game, and is based on two years of ongoing fieldwork. As an initial study, a netnographic approach was used to explore participants' posting and community

involvement behaviors (Kozinets 1998). In order to understand gamers' receptiveness to in-game promotions, in-depth interviews were conducted with gamers who currently or had previously played Farmville. Participants suggest that branded communications messages that are well aligned with the player's motivations for playing and operate within the usual gaming elements (Epic Win category) are well received. Further, players are more likely to participate in the promotion and exhibit greater receptivity toward the branded message when the promotion is highly aligned with both axes. Messaging that is not well aligned with aesthetic or functional game components is not likely to garner the same level of participation or positive affect.

To further test the typology, a second study examined message board comments related to in-game promotional messaging. For the two largest promotions, dual coding was utilized in order to strengthen reliability and validity of the coded measures. The remaining two promotions were coded solely by me. Message board comments suggest players are generally more vocal with regard to violations of expectations related to functional congruency than aesthetic congruency. Gamers are willing to participate in branded promotions that extend beyond the normal game playing elements; however, the perceived additional aesthetic benefits must be greater than those extended within the context of game play. Players appreciate promotional items that create goals within the game (e.g. mastery) or allow the player to share the item with others. Purely decorative promotional items do not fit with the game aesthetic, and are often met with frustration from players.

If a promotion extends outside of the game, additional consideration should be given to the logistical issues associated with its implementation—especially when the promotion includes an offline element. In each promotion that was examined, a large number of players were excluded from the promotion for a number of reasons, including: living outside of the

participating country, specially marked product not available in participating stores, and stores not located within a reasonable driving distance. The value of the in-game promotional item can drive considerable interest among the player demographic. Social network gamers feel strongly that additional steps should be taken by managers to ensure that all players have an equal opportunity to participate in promotions.

### **Essay 3**

The digital age has modified consumers' expectations of branded communications. Prior to social networks, mass media communication channels such as TV and radio allowed brand managers to 'speak to' customers (Hoffman and Novak 1996). However, the proliferation of social media has instigated a revolution in the communications field, resulting in consumers expecting the brand to 'interact with' them in a medium where the consumer controls every aspect of the conversation—the timing, the channel, and the content. As this shift occurs, brand managers are seeking new ways to engage consumers online whilst steering the conversation in a way that is also beneficial to the firm. Using in-depth interviews with brand managers and senior agency personnel, I attempt to understand how social media channels are being incorporated into a firm's overarching marketing communications strategy to facilitate a deeper connection between the customer and the brand.

The present research suggests that integration, consistency, and personalization are all vital themes for a successful social media strategy. Brand managers have long understood the importance of integration and consistency in developing a media communications plan, though the concept of personalization adds a dimension of complexity that hasn't been encountered previously. Managers must identify ways to listen and respond to customers in a meaningful way, using a consistent voice across platforms. The implementation difference between



traditional and social media must be subtle—such as responding to a customer inquiry that is posted on a brand Fan page. Those who are responsible for representing the firm in a social space must fully understand the brand essence and ensure that customer communications are representative of the established brand personality. Creating a separate personality for digital spaces can seem inauthentic, leaving customers confused about what the brand represents.

Social media channels complement other existing media channels by driving user engagement and creating a context whereby users can interact with the brand. Cautionary tales that have guided firms' hesitancy to fully engage customers online is only partially misguided. The benefits of social media far outweigh the risks; the online nature of social channels lends itself to allowing brand managers to listen and respond to a greater number and variety of customers concerns, thereby creating an opportunity for savvy managers to develop product offerings uniquely aligned with customer needs.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

As social media becomes an increasingly pervasive presence in everyday life, users are becoming acutely aware of the drawbacks associated with oversharing in the digital space. Many users are acutely aware of the perils of social media, resulting in a critical examination of each and every comment, photo, and connection in the digital realm. However, not all social network users exercise caution in determining what information is appropriate for sharing online. Legal issues have emerged with regard to individuals' constitutional rights and the rights of employers to terminate employees who cast their employer in a poor light in the virtual space. For example, managers seeking to protect the reputation of the firm online have terminated employees for comments made in social media (Greenhouse 2013). Further, a number of court cases have left the general public unsure of exactly what types of speech are protected. The National Labor

Relations Board, which typically oversees labor issues of unionized workers, has ruled that employers' blanket restrictions of employee social media commentary related to the employer are prohibited. The board's ruling proposes that lone rants about employers are not permissible, though "concerted acts" and requests for "mutual aid" are protected. The board's rulings also apply to any private sector employer, suggesting that certain types of comments, such as those related to working conditions may be protected. Managers tasked with protecting the firm's reputation online should consider specific social media policies that delineate employees' social network activities that are prohibited.

Despite these concerns, social media can serve as a valuable tool to overcome the crowded advertising space and create meaningful interactions with customers. Marketing communications in the realm of social network games, and more broadly social media, should be carefully developed and managed. The nature of social network games offers a promising avenue for interaction with a highly engaged audience. In addition to garnering a presence with the game audience, managers can often increase traffic to both firm-owned digital spaces and retail locations. Still, incorporating out-of-game activities into promotional messaging creates a unique set of challenges, as described here.

Social media is creating an excellent opportunity for managers to (1) listen and respond to customer concerns, and (2) create unique engagement opportunities to strengthen the customer-brand relationship. Branded communication missteps can be costly and highly publicized, though the upside of maintaining a brand presence in social media can be considerably greater. As social media has evolved, managers' comfort with the medium as a tool to publicly engage in a dialogue with customers has increased. In spite of this, some brand managers may take drastic measures when controversy ensues. Versace came under fire from

activists for a clothing line that featured sand blasted jeans (Indvik 2011); activists posted dozens of messages to the Versace Facebook page protesting use of the dangerous sand blasting practice. In response, managers removed the negative postings as well as the posting rights for all brand Fans; the brand's Facebook page does allow users to comment on communications initiated by the firm, but consumers can no longer initiate conversations on the brand fan page. Though this may protect the brand from public attack, such drastic measures also create barriers to consumers who genuinely desire to interact with the company. Research has shown that community members (such as those on a Facebook Fan page) vigorously defend the brand in the face of opposition, which serves to strengthen the community (Fournier and Lee 2009). Brand managers should seek to embrace the conflict between the brand fans and the opposition.

Consumers are willing to interact with firms when the consumer related benefits of the online interactions are clear. Managers with a well-developed social media strategy can gain customer insights by listening and responding to comments made in social media. Marketing communications strategies should place an emphasis on enhancing the customer-brand relationship; pushing for sales in the digital space is likely to be met with skepticism and frustration. The consumer is in control of the interaction, and managers must demonstrate value in order to remain a part of the conversation.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The evolution of social media provides a number of possibilities for future research from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. While little academic research has been published to date, social media is considered a hot topic in mainstream journalism. Managers seek guidance and best practices from other firms and academia, and researchers are beginning to recognize the importance of better understanding the managerial opportunities and societal implications of

social media. This section is broken into five categories to address the major themes of: social media platforms, advertising in the age of social media, crowdsourcing, public policy, and organizational structure and policy.

### **Social Media Platforms**

From a marketing standpoint, it would be beneficial to categorize and explicate the benefits and drawbacks of the various types of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. Though platforms themselves may change over time, each platform offers inherent benefits to its user base. As an example, picture and idea sharing websites such as *Pinterest* are beneficial in that managers are able to better understand the consumer's vision of the brand in relation to other products within and across categories. Another example is that of mobile check-in/gamification applications such as *Foursquare* that allow users to "check in" to retail locations, which in turn notifies nearby friends of the user's exact location. Foursquare users compete to become Mayor of a retail location by garnering the greatest number of visits in a 30 days period; some retail stores offer premium discounts (or free products) to the current Mayor. Mobile check-in applications can be used to track frequent guests, offer periodic discounts, and generate traffic to a geographic location. With a goal of guiding managerial decisions toward industry specific or product specific platform choices, an emphasis should be placed on identifying the benefits and drawbacks offered by categories of similar platforms. Research should seek to establish how various industries can utilize different social media platforms in order to gain deeper customer insights.

One of the greatest opportunities in the realm of social media is that of mobile applications. As smart phone usage increases, more consumers are viewing the devices as a primary means of communication and organization (Pramis 2013). Mobile phone applications

are also rising in popularity as consumers seek tools to enhance their lives and save time. As an example, several banks now offer customers the option to deposit checks through its mobile device application, creating a convenient tool for customers while also reducing the demand for retail personnel. Researchers could explore how a firm's traditional business model can be enhanced through mobile applications. Other questions of interest may include: What service efficiencies can be gained through use of mobile applications?; How can mobile platforms play a role in consumer shopping?; What role do mobile applications play in generating in-store traffic?; And, how can geo-location based advertising facilitate offline activities?

### **Marketing Communications in the Social Age**

Much current research has focused on the nature of and individual receptiveness to marketing communications in social media. The most popular social network site, Facebook, became a publicly traded company in 2011. The firm's revenue stream is generated through paid advertising—as the company's founder has long promised that the network would remain a free entity for users (Cohen 2012). With Facebook's conversion to a public entity, many users feel the social media giant has seemingly sold out the user experience in favor of advertising revenue to appease stockholders (Lafferty 2013). A growing number of users are indicating a willingness to pay fees in order to avoid the advertising (Kruse 2013; Lafferty 2013). Research should explore the underlying issues that users have with advertisement inclusion on social platforms such as Facebook. Some participants in my research suggest that users oppose social media advertising because the domain is an overtly personal space (McCambley 2013). Other participants suggest that opposition lies in the fact that social media advertising is impersonal and obtrusive. Proponents of social network advertising suggest that the medium is not as disliked as popular press may suggest. The most obtrusive of advertising stories in Facebook—

sponsored stories that appear within the user's News Feed—have a 46% higher click through rate than advertising appearing on the side of the user's News Feed (Constine 2011). A number of opportunities exist in this realm. Questions of interest include: How do interactive advertising spots change user receptiveness to social network advertising?; What are the characteristics of an effective social network advertising strategy?; And, what advertisement components increase a user's willingness to click on the ad for more information? Research could also explore user attitudes and behaviors toward advertising of paid (advertising space purchased by the firm) versus free advertising (message is shared virally by a user to her friends).

Social TV is a fairly recent phenomenon that is also influencing the effectiveness of advertising in the social age. Social TV has been defined by iModerate (2012) as “connecting with people via social networks while watching television, combining discovery and experience.” A study by the same group found that that 58% of heavy engagers (watch TV more than 10 hours per week) watch more live TV because they need to be part of the conversation in real-time. TiVo and other DVR technologies were introduced in the early 2000's and are often blamed for reducing traditional advertising effectiveness, as viewers were able to record the program and fast forward through commercials. Social TV has reintroduced a sense of urgency with the TV viewing experience by creating a community of fans that can dialogue in real time as the show airs. Future research could examine the effectiveness of advertising during television shows that utilize a social component versus shows that do not. Does the presence of a social TV component influence the responsiveness of consumers to advertising messages that are aired during commercial breaks?

A final research direction with regard to advertising in social media is related to the international nature of social network games. As was the case with promotional messaging in

Farmville, the international availability of social network games creates additional complications in designing promotions for a subset of a population. Traditionally, branded communications have been targeted by geography; firms restricted the purchase of media space to areas where the product was sold. However, game developers have yet to segment the player audience in a similar way. As a result, both eligible and ineligible players become aware of the promotion and subsequently develop resentment toward the promotional messaging—and their firm—for invading the game space without consideration to the gaming experience. Future research should examine how firms can integrate into social network games in such a way as to further the gaming experience for all players while simultaneously achieving the firm's goal for the promotion. Should firms offer the promotional items to the entire player base, regardless of whether the player is able to become a customer of the firm? Are there longer term repercussions associated with excluding a portion of the players from a promotional venture? What are the benefits and drawbacks to enacting a promotion that is available to all players?

### **Crowdsourcing**

Crowdsourcing is gaining interest among managers seeking to better align a company's product offerings with customer needs. Crowdsourcing is defined as "...the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call. This can take the form of peer-production (when the job is performed collaboratively), but is also often undertaken by sole individuals. The crucial prerequisite is the use of the open call format and the large network of potential laborers" (Howe 2006). Starbucks (<http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/>) invites consumers to share ideas and vote on others' ideas. Submitted concepts are reviewed by a website moderator and the audience is updated on the status of suggestions. General Electric's

Ecomagination (<http://challenge.ecomagination.com/ct/a.bix?c=home>) builds upon a similar concept, calling upon businesses, entrepreneurs, innovators and students to share their ideas on how to reduce energy consumption. Coupling managers' breadth of company specific knowledge regarding organizational practices and an innovative wish list of suggestions from consumers can lead to the next generation of products that are highly attuned with customer needs. On the other hand, managers with a vested interest in existing practices may view innovative suggestions with skepticism, refusing to consider all but the most easily attainable suggestions. Research should explore whether the marketplace is more receptive to crowdsourced product ideas. What consumer related benefits are derived from crowdsourcing? Does crowdsourcing ultimately reduce product costs for the consumer? For the firm? Researchers should also seek to understand how managers can generate crowdsourced ideas, systematically evaluate the feasibility of the suggestions, and develop the suggestion. What are the firm related benefits of crowdsourcing? Does crowdsourcing lead to more innovative, customer aligned product offerings?

### **Public Policy**

As social media plays a larger role in societal interactions, the implications of public policy should also receive researchers' attention. Online interactions offer a level of anonymity (at worst) or distance (at best) from those whom a user interacts with. Removing the humanizing element of face-to-face interactions has created a culture amongst today's youth that raises considerable concern for society. A number of recent press reports signify the importance of examining public policy with regard to social media. As a first example, two juveniles (age 16 and 17) were recently convicted of rape after video evidence of the assault was found on social media websites including YouTube and Facebook (Petrecca 2013). Alarming, the evidence was posted to social media outlets by witnesses who did not wish to come forward. Secondly,



social network sites such as Facebook and its predecessor MySpace have been identified as tools for cyber-bullying—a term used to refer to bullying that takes place in an online setting. Legislators are seeking to enact strict penalties for cyber bullies (Lang 2013). A final, recent example is that of a new website that allows users to post anything they wish anonymously. The website is touted as a tool to allow students to confess their darkest secrets online; other users are able to view and respond to these secrets, providing a virtual support group for the anonymous poster (Bautista 2013). These examples illustrate the importance of investigating the influence of social media on society. How can policy makers and marketers bridge the divide between online and face-to-face interactions? Do social media platforms enhance self-esteem as previous literature suggests (Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe 2008; Zywica and Danowski 2008), or are these platforms creating a social deficit in human interactions?

### **Organizational Structure and Policy**

Managerial policies could also prove fertile grounds for future research endeavors. A firm's employees must author communications that are shared with followers in a digital space. In many cases, these same employees were chosen (or volunteered) due to the employee's comfort and involvement with social media. Further, these employees often maintain a personal account in addition to managing the firm's online social media account. However, dual authorship has been cited by a number of firms whose employees shared a communication that was not intended for the firm's audience. A Red Cross employee accidentally tweeted a message regarding the person's intent to become intoxicated, using the hashtag #gettingslizzerd; Red Cross recognized the error and quickly removed the tweet. A followup tweet from the brand inserted humor into the awkward misstep to reassure followers: "We've deleted the rogue tweet, but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we've confiscated the keys." (Stopera 2011). A

Microsoft employee made a similar gaffe in 2012, resulting in the software giant retracting the statement and issuing a public apology (Palmer 2012). Future research could examine organizational policies that may prevent rogue communications from being sent via the firm's social communications. Future research should also seek to understand organizational best practices that facilitate a sense of personalization while also ensuring that the brand message is represented consistently across all customer contact points.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social media offers an interesting paradigm for future research, as there are few research endeavors that seemingly touch the fabric of every consumer in the same way. Social media channels have changed the way that consumers expect to interact with one another and with favored firms in an online setting. The consumer is decidedly in control of the conversation, though managers can influence the conversation by being in the right space at the right time. Consumers are both willing and able to share their thoughts with firms, and social media has created a venue where this can be done easily and painlessly. In creating a presence on a social media channel, firms must be willing to take the good with the bad; managers that quickly address consumer concerns can simultaneously avoid becoming a social media disaster parable and increase the positive word of mouth associated with being a responsive brand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## APPENDIX A: EPIC FAIL PROMOTION IMAGERY

AVG Promotion (February 24 2011 – March 2, 2011)



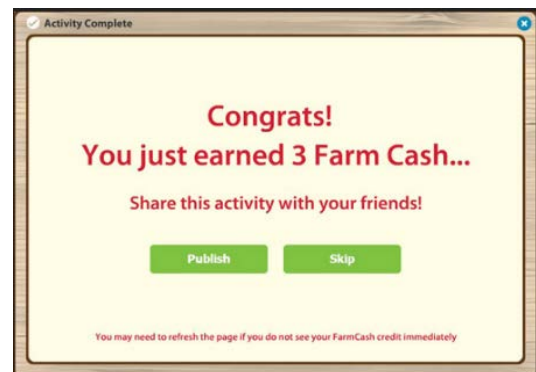
Receive a FREE AVG® Biplane and three Instant Grow flights with purchase of AVG's PC TuneUp! FarmVille players will receive an exclusive discount on the purchase of PC TuneUp.

<http://zyn.ga/3Nv> <-- Visit FarmVille today before this special is over!



Friday at 6:57pm · Like · Comment · View Feedback (3,577) · Share

Bing Promotion (March 3, 2010)





## APPENDIX B: NOOB PROMOTION IMAGERY

McDonald's Promotion (October 6, 2010 – October 8, 2010)



Megamind Movie Promotion (November 4, 2010 – November 12, 2010)



Farmers Insurance Promotion (October 18, 2010 – October 28, 2010)



## APPENDIX C: WOOT PROMOTION IMAGERY

Proflowers Promotion (April 26, 2011 – May 8, 2011; also available in 2010 and 2012)



Netflix Promotion (Offer ongoing—no specific date range, Farm Cash offer varies daily)



7-Eleven Convenience Store Promotion (May 21, 2010 - July 15, 2010)





## APPENDIX D: EPIC WIN PROMOTION IMAGERY

Lady Gaga Promotion (May 17, 2011 – May 24, 2011)



Stouffers Promotion (March 9, 2011 – March 10, 2011)



## **APPENDIX E: MANAGERIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Interview Guide**

This guide was loosely utilized in the interviews associated with the present research project.

- **Role Within Company:**
  1. Tell me about your role within the company?
  2. Tell me about the structure of your department? (IS SM integrated into marketing or separate)
  3. How does your company incorporate social media into its overall strategy?
  4. Tell me about your goals with using social media?
  5. Tell me about your philosophy in approaching social media?
- **Specific Uses of Social:**
  1. Tell me specifically about how you (or your company?) use social media?
  2. How might social media be used differently in a B2B than in B2C?
  3. How does your company engage consumers in social media channels?
  4. Can you talk about how you use [insert media type here]?
  5. How do you determine which social media tools to use?
    - Describe the decision making process of selecting the social media tools to use.
- **Goals and Learnings:**
  1. How do you see the fit between paid and earned media strategy?
  2. How do you feel about using social media as the sole business strategy?
  3. What have you learned so far in using social media?
  4. How does your firm measure effectiveness of a social media strategy?
- **Vision:**
  1. Do you think that some firms are a better fit for certain types of social media than others?
  2. Can you give me an example of a good fit?
    - Can you think of a social media that has been particularly effective for your firm?
    - One that was a poor fit?
    - Tell me about those experiences
  3. Do you see any negatives to social media participation?
  4. Tell me about your vision of social media as it relates to your company.
  5. How can brands benefit from social media?
  6. Where do you see social media going forward?
- **Additional Contact Recommendations:**
  1. Can you recommend other managers who also work in social media and may be willing to share their insights with me?