

## **The Facebook Experience: *A phenomenology of Facebook use***

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### **Abstract**

Based on the diaries and interviews of five Facebook users, we found that the phenomenology of Facebook use can be divided into three phases: managing intentions, experiencing the consequences of actions, and feeling a range of emotions. We propose that the theoretical framework we found in this study—of understanding the experience of Facebook as an experience of varying degrees of personal control—can be applied to understanding other social experiences as well.

**Keywords:** diary method, experience, Facebook, interviews, phenomenology, social media

## **Introduction**

Facebook, created in 2004, now has more than 600 million users (Facebook, 2012; Pingdom, 2012). And scholars have taken note. The social networking site has become a widespread subject for academic research. Its popularity cuts across geographical boundaries, cultures and even generations. It is used not only for leisure but also for communication and even news consumption (e.g. Glynn, Huges, & Hoffman, 2012; Lee & Ma, 2012), especially among teens. Thus, scholars have sought to understand what motivates users to go on Facebook (e.g. Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011), an enlightening stream of research that has already unearthed so much, but has taken for granted the question of what it is that users actually experience on Facebook. In short, what is in short supply is our understanding of the phenomenology of Facebook use.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to get at the essence of an experience (Creswell, 2007). Its goal is to come up with a comprehensive and humanistic understanding of a phenomenon by analyzing the lived experiences of the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. This is our goal in this study: to get at the essence of what users actually experience when they go on Facebook.

We are Facebook users ourselves. We view others' photos, and we share some of our own. We read others' status updates and comments, and also share some of our own. We "like" posts and comments, and write our own comments as well. We are, therefore, part of the so-called Facebook community (for a discussion of Facebook as a community, see Gruzdz, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011; Pentecost, 2011). Yet articulating what we experience while engaging in these activities is something we ourselves have taken for granted. Considering the number of people on Facebook, how Facebook is experienced is an important question to answer. Therefore, in this study, we examine the experience of five Facebook users by combining two qualitative methods under the methodology of phenomenology: diary and interview.

## Literature Review

### Facebook Studies

Many studies about Facebook can be classified into two streams of research: 1) who uses Facebook and 2) why are they using Facebook. Studies have provided us with a clearer picture of the Facebook demographics, although the profile of a typical Facebook user is ever-changing. But the literature tells us that females are more likely than males to use social networking sites (Hargittai, 2007; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), but when males do use Facebook, they tend to disclose more personal information than females (Special & Li-Barber, 2012). Younger people also tend to use Facebook more often (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). In terms of personalities, extroverts are more likely to create Facebook accounts than introverts (Glynn et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2009).

Studies have also mapped out several uses and gratifications that motivate people to use Facebook, and these efforts have resulted in numerous typologies of motivations. For instance, Debatin (2009) found three dimensions of needs satisfied by social networking sites (SNSs): the need for diversion and entertainment; the need for (para-social) relationships; and the need for identity construction. Urista and colleagues (2009) also identified five themes explaining the use of social networking sites: efficient communication, convenient communication, curiosity about others, popularity, and relationship formation and reinforcement. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) found that pastime and social information gratifications were the most important in predicting frequency of Facebook use. Others also found that self-presentation and self-disclosure motivations are also strong motivators for social media use (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hogan, 2010; Ledbetter et al., 2011; Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

Facebook, however, is a toolkit of different uses (Smock et al., 2011) that range from passively reading what other users post to posting different types of content: text, photos and even videos. Thus, it is likely that users engage in different activities to fulfill different gratifications. For example, joining a Facebook group is predicted by the following motivations: positively by expressive information sharing and negatively by social interaction motivation (Smock et al., 2011). Writing comments is linked to relaxing, entertainment, companionship, and social interaction motivations (Smock et al., 2011). Sharing news links is

linked to education and information-sharing motivations (Baek et al., 2011) as well as to status seeking, socializing and information-seeking gratifications (Lee & Ma, 2012).

These streams of research explain what factors lead people to use Facebook, exploring the effects of demographics, attitudes and motivations. However, they fail to address the fundamental question of what Facebook use is about.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a philosophy resting on the basic assumption that the only way of knowing is through experience, so that knowledge emerges only out of our experiences (Moustakas, 1994). How we know the world depends on how we experience it. Therefore, phenomena “are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). If we are to better understand the reasons and implications of Facebook use, we must first understand what it is that users experience when they use Facebook. Indeed, the goal of phenomenology is to describe “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

Several scholars consider phenomenology also as a methodology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). As a methodology, phenomenology has been used in a variety of studies seeking to understand the essence of experiences across a variety of fields, although its use is most widespread in education and health research (e.g. Jamjoom, 2010; Rose, 2011; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). The initial step for researchers is to identify a phenomenon—the “object” of human experience (van Manen, 1990). For example, phenomenological analysis has been used to understand the phenomenon of alienation and how high school students have experienced it (Schulz & Rubel, 2011), the phenomenon of being a female teacher teaching Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia (Jamjoom, 2010), and the phenomenon of switching from face-to-face classes to online instruction as experienced by two professors (Crawley, Fewell, & Sugar, 2009). Phenomenology has also been used to understand the experiences of nurses who advocate for their patients (Hanks, 2008), of transplant patients and their families (Bauer & Orbe, 2001), as well as of three pregnant women and their journeys to motherhood (Smith, 1999). Phenomenological studies have ranged from describing the experiences of two individuals to documenting the common experiences of a group of 30 persons (Creswell,

2007). These descriptions are usually based on in-depth interviews and even multiple interviews of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Rockwell and Giles (2009) studied the phenomenology of being famous through interviews of 15 American celebrities: actors, athletes, politicians, among others. They found that the experience can be divided into four temporal phases: love/hate, addiction, acceptance, and adaptation (Rockwell & Giles, 2009). The experience of fame ranges from accumulating wealth to a feeling of isolation and loss of privacy. Rose (2011) also used interviews with 10 students to understand the experience of reading digitized texts, or texts in e-books formats. She found that students reading from their screens experienced some difficulty in keeping focused, of being always reminded of the presence of the screen, and some awareness of the missing physical pages, among others (Rose, 2011).

Creswell (2007) classified two types of phenomenology as a qualitative methodology: hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). While hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive process, with the researcher making interpretations, transcendental phenomenology is “focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). For this study, we are employing Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental approach to understand the experience of using Facebook.

### **Synthesis**

Ersoy (2011) used a phenomenological approach to understand how 25 grade school students in Turkey perceive Facebook. The children were asked to draw pictures about Facebook and were interviewed about their drawings. Ersoy (2011) found that these children used Facebook for communication and entertainment and had generally favorable evaluations of their experiences in using Facebook. Of course these children used Facebook differently from teenagers: Many of them use Facebook for only less than an hour per day and had less than 75 Facebook friends. The study described the reasons for these children’s use of Facebook and explained the positive and negative experiences these children have with Facebook. But it did not describe the actual experience: *When users are on Facebook, what is it that they experience?*

Transcendental phenomenology, the specific phenomenological approach we are using, is “committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). This is because a phenomenon can be lived again through descriptions. If what we know about the world is through our experience of it, how we describe that experience becomes a way of knowing. In our attempt to understand what it is that individuals experience when they use Facebook, we rely on the descriptions of our participants of their experiences, mindful that inasmuch as different individuals can have different experiences, our goal is to get at what is common, that which underlies the basic experience of using Facebook. In this study, we are interested in the essence of the Facebook experience.

### **Methods**

In this study we utilize two methods common to phenomenology: the interview and the diary method. Creswell (2007) said that because of phenomenology’s goal of uncovering the essence of an experience, the interview is usually the main method of gathering data. For example, Rockwell and Giles (2009) conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 participants for an average of about 1 to 1.5 hours per interview. But since phenomenology is interested in descriptions of the experience, the diary method, where participants are asked to describe—in their own terms and in their own private locations—their experiences, is also an important method to gather data. For example, Smith’s (1999) study of threewomen’s experiences of pregnancy and motherhood put together data from numerous sources, including interviews with the women and their respective diaries. A combination of both methods ensures that participants can articulate their experiences in their own words, safe from being observed, in their diaries and that we, the researchers, also have the chance to probe particular responses during the interviews.

For this study, we invited five college students to participate and maintain a diary of their Facebook use for one complete week. We visited classes, invited students to take an online survey to help us select the five participants, and, as an incentive, promised \$100 Visa check cards for each selected participant. In our online survey, we asked students to rate how frequently they used Facebook and to answer a few questions about their Facebook use. We received 195 responses. Since our goal is to describe the essence of the experience of being on Facebook, we selected participants who used Facebook on a regular basis and who used it for a variety of reasons—posting their own information, viewing those of others, commenting

on posts. Finally, we selected two males and three females to participate in the actual study. Of course, we are mindful that the experiences of five college students do not represent those of all college students, but the number is acceptable for a phenomenological study. Generalization to the population is not our goal. Phenomenology is interested more in the depth of descriptions rather than in the breadth of observations. To get at the essence of a common experience, we have to rely on a wealth of data from each individual. Analyzing the diary entries and interview transcripts of five individuals provided us with a wealth of qualitative data that allowed us to dig through the depth of their experiences. We asked our participants to keep a diary of their Facebook activities for a week. Then, we met with them individually for interviews.

### **Diary**

The diary method is defined as the “recording of activities and experiences usually in written format, within specific episodes of time” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 50). The use of commissioned diaries provides access to activities that would otherwise be not open to participant observation (Alaszewski, 2006; Bloor & Wood, 2006; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). The diary method is common in studies about sexual behavior (Graham, Catania, Brand, Duong, & Canchola, 2003; Harvey, 2011) and in medical sociology (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001; Nicholl, 2010). This is because commissioned diaries provide a way to gather information about sensitive issues that participants might not be very open to talk about during interviews (e.g. Graham et al., 2003) or spontaneously demonstrate in field observations. Furthermore, it provides a lot of data for a comprehensive analysis (Lewis, Sligo, & Massey, 2005). It provides not only information about behavior but also about individuals’ interpretations of events (Alaszewski, 2006). It is also cheaper and less time-consuming than ethnography (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977) while it encourages immediate data recording that helps preserve accuracy and completeness of accounts (Lewis et al., 2005). A way to ensure that diarists treat the diary as their own is to assure them of confidentiality (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001; Lewis et al., 2005). Therefore, in this study, we provide only the pseudonyms of our participants. The locations in their entries have also been changed to protect their identities.

We provided a five-page diary guide to our participants. This is an acceptable procedure to help diarists focus on the phenomenon being explored (Bloor & Wood, 2006). We

encouraged them to record each activity as soon as possible. We also provided them a list of Facebook activities that we explained were not exhaustive but representative of the kinds of activities we were interested in. This was aimed at providing them the idea of what kinds of activities we wanted them to keep track of. We followed Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) example of using *who-what-when-where-how* questions to guide our diarists. We also asked our diarists to write about "why" they engaged in a particular activity. We kept our guide questions very general to encourage the diarists to write in their own words (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Unlike earlier studies, we chose to use an electronic, not handwritten diary. We gave the diarists freedom to use whatever format that suited them. This is in keeping with the times. College students rarely handwrite anymore. This method generated 61 pages of diary entries (21, 463 words) from the five participants.

### **Interview**

It is common for the diary method to be used in combination with other methods, such as the interview (Smith, 1999; Wheeler & Rois, 1991; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). An advantage of the interview method is the "wealth of detail that it provides" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 139). It enables people to provide stories, accounts and explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). This method is appropriate for studies, such as this one, which seek to understand "the social actor's experience, knowledge, and worldviews" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 173). Interviews also allow researchers to get a glimpse into the past and present of the interviewee (Weiss, 1995). A researcher should be looking for interviewees who can share knowledge and help understand the reality of the experience, which is what we sought to achieve when we selected the five participants in our study.

A researcher should spend a fair amount of time researching how a phenomena occurs before interviewing subjects (Van Maanen, 1988). Thus, we first read our participants diaries before our interviews began. McCracken (1988) argued that the more a researcher knows about an interviewee, the better questions one can ask. The more researchers know about participants, the better they will understand the subject's language, which is vital in understanding the phenomenon (Spradley, 1979).

After our participants completed their one week's worth of diary entries, we met with them individually for interviews that lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. In those interviews, we



asked them about their experience of using Facebook, prompting them to describe their experiences in their own words. This method generated 72 pages of interview transcripts (25, 349 words) from our interviews with the five participants.

### **Analysis**

We followed the steps that Moustakas (1994) outlined in his transcendental approach to phenomenology. First, we began with the process of *bracketing* which involves “a process of rigorous self-reflection” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 5). We wrote about our own experiences in using Facebook when we started this research project. While we cannot completely bracket out our own presumptions about the experience of using Facebook, the process of bracketing made us aware at the beginning of our study and throughout our analysis of our own articulation of our experiences.

Second, we read the diary entries and the transcripts multiple times. For each individual, we followed the process of *horizontalization* by highlighting important statements and quotes from the diary and the transcript. Then, we retained only the statements and quotes that contained a relevant description of the experience, or those that Moustakas (1994) referred to as the *horizons* (Moustakas, 1994). Then, we clustered the statements into themes. Third, based on these themes, we wrote a *textual description* of what the participant experienced. Then, we also wrote a description of how the experience happened, which is called the *structural description* (Creswell, 2007). We went through these processes with each of our five participants. In doing so, we were able to finally compose a composite description of the phenomenon by integrating the textual and structural descriptions across our five participants. This is the *essence* of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

In the following sections, we discuss the themes that emerged from the diaries of our five participants and our interviews with them: Lisa, 19; Linda, 20; Nancy, 19; James, 19; and John, 19 (all pseudonyms). When we quote from their diaries, we retain the original language, not even correcting for grammar or typographical mistakes. Most of them reported to have started their accounts five years ago, except for James, who has been using it for only four years, and Nancy, who has been using it for six years. Most of them use Facebook to communicate with their peers and family.

## **The Phenomenology of Facebook Use**

Studies have mapped out the personal traits and motivations that lead users to go on Facebook and so our analysis specifically looks at what users experience after they have logged in. Our analysis revealed three phases of experiences on Facebook: managing intentions, consequences of actions, and range of emotions.

### **Managing Intentions**

For many users, logging on Facebook is already a habit. They open their laptops or browse their mobile phones in between classes, jobs, or bus rides and go on Facebook usually without a specific purpose. But once they are inside Facebook, they encounter an overwhelming range of possibilities in terms of activities they can engage in. What should they do? They have to *manage their intentions*.

These intentions eventually lead to which activities users will engage in. Are they going to update their status? Share a photo? Un-tag themselves from a post? Click “like” on someone’s post? The experience that leads to engaging in any of these activities is an experience of weighing reasons and implications for each activity. Intentions can be classified into personal expectations and social obligations.

### **Personal Expectations**

Users experience having to manage their personal expectations in terms of the response they will get from engaging in particular activities on Facebook. First, users come up with expectations of how others will interpret particular actions. For example, John writes in his diary about “liking” a friend’s cover photo which he thinks is “funny and corny.” He is not sure how his friend will understand the “like,” but he hopes his friend will get it that he is just trying to mess with him. Linda also thought about posting a video about loneliness because she was feeling down, but she was worried how her boyfriend might interpret the post:

I think about posting a Wilco video “How to Fight Loneliness” but then I stop because (Ryan) doesn’t really think I’m lonely yet and I don’t think I’m ready to let him think that. And I think if he listens to that song, he will apply it to what’s going on with us, and then either get annoyed or feel bad and I would like neither of those things to happen. I guess it hurts because there is something different about just playing a song and actually posting it on your wall. It’s like telling the world “guess how I’m feeling,

guess what type of music I like, look at how I feel.” And I guess sharing could make me feel better. But I don’t because I don’t want that attention being drawn to (Ryan) right now.

In the above example, we see how Linda navigates through her expectations of how Ryan might respond if she posted that video. Even if she really wants to post it as a way of letting out how she feels, she does not post it because of her own expectations of how others, specifically her boyfriend, will react to the video. In this example we see that Linda does not only manage her expectations of how Ryan will respond, but also weighs this with her own feelings. Of course she might be wrong, and Ryan might not respond the way she expects he will, but she does not take the chance.

A tangible way to evaluate responses to one’s posts is the number of “likes” or “comments” they get. Likes and comments have become sort of a currency on Facebook that could represent popularity, approval, or even notoriety. John writes about updating his status to say he is playing soccer again. He says he wants to show his friends how much he miss playing the game. "I’m really hoping some of my good friends at home will notice my status and like it." Here we can see that he has some expectations of how others will respond. But the same expectation of how others might respond also discourages him from posting something. For example, he thinks about posting a status update about the good weather, but then he says: "It seems like everyone else does that and no one really cares. The weather is nice, I don’t need to tell people that though." So he ends up not posting it.

Lisa also experienced the same thing: “So I was walking through (Memorial Union) and there’s some construction going on at the old McDonalds. I thought about taking a picture of it and posting it to Facebook, but then I thought it would be pretty pointless. I don’t know if anyone cares.”

John explains in his interview that he manages his expectations based on whether his audience will actually care and how this expectation is important: "I would say acknowledgment would be a big thing so, like, if I post a status and I get likes from it, you know, it's definitely a good thing because, you know, it's nice to see that people care about what I’m doing."

### **Social Obligations**

Part of managing one's expectations is weighing in on what others expect of you. This is particularly true on Facebook, where one feels some sense of belonging to a virtual community, where certain unwritten expectations abound. For example, James writes about not wanting to appear too sentimental, something he thinks is frowned upon by the virtual community, or at least by his immediate network of fellow users. So even he says he really loves one of his professors so much for bringing him to a conference, he doesn't say that on his Facebook. He says in his diary: "Sometimes Facebook posts that are serious get mocked. I know even my friends and family sometimes mock posts that are way too long and sentimental." So because he thinks he is expected not to be sentimental, he refuses to be one on Facebook, even during instances when he feels sentimental about something or someone. For Lisa, educating her peers is an obligation. She experiences this sense of obligation when she is on Facebook. She feels it is her responsibility to help inform others. Thus:

I've posted an article about the relationships between North Korea, South Korea and the United States to my group's wall so others could see it. It's pretty interesting... Also, some people had posted some ignorant comments on there, and whenever that happens I feel more inclined to post something either on the website or Facebook, with my own opinion/facts I research about the topic.

This weighing in on social obligations also leads users to like or comment on others' posts. For example, John writes that he liked a post by a friend to "show him that I support what he's doing." After a friend posted a song on his wall as part of an "inside joke" between them, John felt the need to post something back on his friend's wall. He says: "I feel like I should post something back on his wall but I'm really not sure what. It has to be the right song because I don't want him to get the wrong idea in terms of the joke and what we're talking about."

### **Consequences of Actions**

When users manage their intentions, how they resolve it leads them to engage in particular activities. These activities and their consequences also provide users with particular experiences. Do users meet their social obligations? Are their personal expectations fulfilled? For example, John posted his status update about missing soccer, hoping his friends at home will notice. He got some likes and comments, which fulfilled his expectations. He says: "I got

some likes on my updated status and some of my friends also commented on it. This is what I was looking for.”

But another possible consequence of engaging in an activity, aside from meeting one’s obligation and fulfilling one’s expectation, is a feeling of dissonance that might lead someone to try to undo an earlier activity. For example, James writes about a post that he “liked,” that of a girl he knew from high school who posted an update saying she just kissed another girl. He writes: “Initially I was turned on and my mind wondered what that looked like.” But after reading other people comment on that post, he decided to “unlike” the post, thinking to himself that he did not want to tolerate her behavior:

I read a comment underneath by my home friend (Penny Briggs) which said ‘not surprised.’ I then unliked the post because I thought me and the 13 other people that did like it were only encouraging her to continue this destructive behavior!

### **Range of Emotions**

When obligations are met, expectations are fulfilled, and consequences are experienced, users go through an experience of different emotions. Users talk about positive emotions. Lisa talks about the feeling of relief when she is on Facebook, which she says allows her to cope with stress from school and work. Linda experiences the same feeling, saying Facebook allows her some form of escape. She says in our interview:

Yeah, I was going to work and I was just looking at someone’s album and I think you just like forget about the time kind of and you just kind of get like carried away. So yeah I guess you just kind of like get your mind off things really and that's also a problem for school. But yeah I guess it takes your mind to a more social place, where, you know, in real life, being social is kind of relaxing as well.

Being on Facebook also provides the feeling of belonging even to a community of people who are not physically and geographically together. For example, John writes about this after engaging in something hilarious on Facebook:

I also commented on a video that my friend posted of a girl trying to explain the meaning of MPH. It highlights how dumb people can really people. This video was so funny that I decided to post it to one of my other friend’s wall who is from Nebraska. We have an inside joke about dumb girls because he used to always say how he was

always attracted to them. It's crazy how people from different environments can find humor in similar things.

John also narrates an experience of feeling happy after receiving a reply from one of his seniors in the fraternity. He sent a message to a senior in his fraternity and felt happy when the guy responded. The fulfillment of one's expectations can make someone feel happy. He says:

This made me very happy because I really look up to (Mark), and the fact that he's willing to take time out of his day to do service with me really means a lot. I replied to his message saying that I was excited to meet up Wednesday. It's always nice to hold a good conversation with an elder, even if its[sic] over Facebook.

But not all emotions experienced on Facebook are positive. Linda writes about feeling insecure when she sees happy posts on her newsfeed, with her friends raving about the good weather, about their great experiences, at a time when "I feel like shit." James says he feels good that Facebook gives him the chance to gloat, but it also makes him feel sorry for himself. Thus, when expectations are not met, Facebook can also bring the experience of sadness. James looks at his notifications, and sees nothing. He writes: "just got done with my first class, killing sometime in the journalism library. Had no notifications, for some reason dejected and disappointed."

Facebook also gives James the chance to keep track of his crush, a teaching assistant in his class. But it also makes him feel jealous, seeing her photo with a guy he knew she had been dating. "Tonight, it was probably bad. Made me feel crappy, lonely, scared, jealous, pissed at the world! Oh well. Maybe one day. I guess a man can dream." In these examples, users experience Facebook as a roller-coaster of emotions. It can be a happy and fun experience at one point, and then a sad and negative experience at another. Users are at the mercy of what they will encounter once they are on Facebook, but their emotions also hinge on how they managed their intentions to begin with.

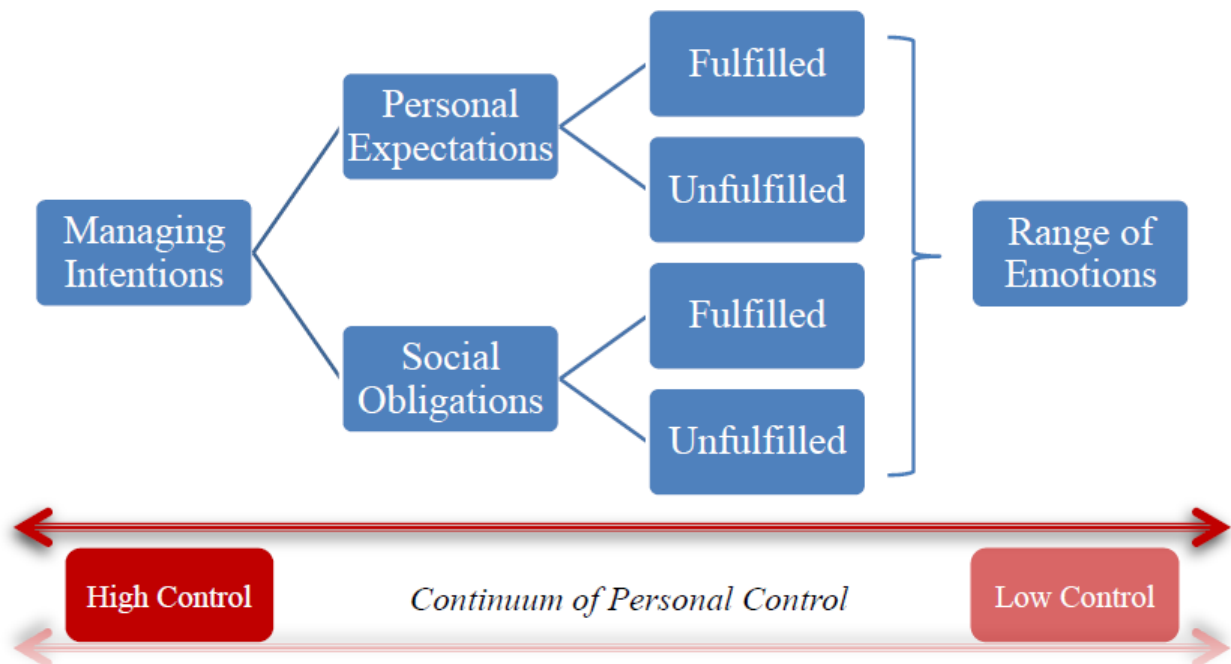
### **A Continuum of Personal Control**

In summary, the phenomenology of Facebook use can be divided into three phases: managing intentions, experiencing the consequences of actions, and feeling a range of emotions (see

Figure 1). Users go through these experiences when they go on Facebook. In this section, we argue how these phases are neatly arranged in a continuum of personal control, ranging from a high to a low level of control (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The Phenomenology of Facebook Use*



The literature on Facebook has outlined the factors that drive Facebook use. Going to Facebook can either be purposive, in search of particular gratifications, or a force of habit, a sub-conscious decision of using it because one has been using it for so long. The reasons for going into Facebook are beyond the scope of our study, but it serves as an important context to understanding what we found here. In general, our participants experienced a continuum of personal control. When they experience weighing in their intentions on Facebook, they experience some form of control. This is an active stage of Facebook experience. Linda experienced the tension of balancing her personal feelings with her expectations of how her boyfriend Ryan would feel if she posts a video. John experienced the feeling of ambivalence when he liked a friend’s post, but expected his friend would understand he was just trying to mess around with him. This experience of managing intentions leads to particular actions that allow users to experience consequences.

The experience of consequences—of expectations and obligations being fulfilled and unfulfilled—sits in the middle of the continuum of personal control. Some consequences are beyond a user’s control. For example, John receives a response from a superior in his fraternity. That is a fulfillment of his expectation that is beyond his control. After sending that initial message, he is at the mercy of the message receiver whether he will respond or not. But some consequences, particularly internal ones, are reversible. For example, James “likes” a status update of a girl who said she kissed another girl. But reading a comment from a common friend, James “unlikes” the update.

Finally, emotional response to fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations and obligations is an experience of low control. When users go into Facebook, it is an active decision to be exposed to unlimited possibilities of actions and content. While users can exercise control on what they share and do on Facebook, how others respond and how others behave on Facebook is beyond their control. Of course, Facebook users can limit whose posts they can see, but they still cannot limit what this limited number of friends would do on Facebook. Our participants experienced a range of emotions on Facebook and most of these are in response to others’ actions or inaction. Linda felt relaxed by looking at some of her friends’ photos. John felt happy when his superior at the fraternity replied to his message. James felt rejected when he got no notifications. When we go on Facebook, we make ourselves vulnerable to feeling happy, sad, angry, aroused, or rejected. James tracked his crush on Facebook. He would feel aroused with some of her pictures and then feel jealous with the others.

What future studies should explore is how emotions experienced on Facebook influences emotions felt after one logs out of the site. For example, Nancy talked about having to un-tag herself in many photos she had been tagged in that she did not like. Not only does her sorority prohibits members from being tagged on problematic social media photos, such as being drunk or dressing improperly, but Nancy also worries about her parents and potential employers seeing inappropriate photos of her. This constant worrying happens even when she is not on Facebook. A question that arises in this example is how worries and emotions that occur during one’s Facebook use can also persist outside Facebook.



If Facebook exposes users to negative emotions that might potentially persist even after using Facebook, why do people keep on logging in? As we have argued, analyzing reasons for going into Facebook is beyond the scope of our study, and yet the experience of our participants in terms of personal control offers interesting plausible explanations. Facebook lets users experience positive emotions. But users have little control over the emotions that things they find on Facebook can trigger. Of course the online world itself offers limitless experience, but what makes the idea of personal control particularly salient on Facebook is that on Facebook one belongs to a community where one builds an identity. This process of building an identity involves emotional investment where, as we described in this study, users manage their intentions and experience the consequence of their actions and those of others, consequences that might also affect offline relationships.

### **Limitations and Implications**

Our study is limited by how willing our participants disclosed their experiences and thoughts in their diaries and in our interviews. Though we took steps to assure them of confidentiality as well as to encourage them to write freely in their diaries, they must have kept some personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences to themselves. Keeping track of one's Facebook use is also a challenge, especially because there are times when logging on Facebook is unconscious, a force of habit. Some of our participants talked about this challenge during our debriefing. Some participants were also more detailed than others in their diary entries. Finally, we only focused on the Facebook experience of college students. While college students can be argued to be among the most active Facebook users, the experience of much younger, such as Ersoy's (2011) grade school participants, and much older users might be different. But again, generalization is not our goal. Instead, we focused on describing the *essence* of the experience of five college students, who shared the same experience of using Facebook.

Still, we believe that our exploratory study paves the way for more work in this attempt to understand the experience of using Facebook. Multiple studies have explored factors that lead users to use Facebook but literature is scarce on what it is that users experience once they are logged in. But to completely understand a phenomenon such as Facebook, it is imperative to explore all facets. Previous research has explored how and why people use Facebook, but not how the experience of logging on, communicating with others, and consuming information

feels. This is important because that feeling, that experience, helps answer the question of why Facebook is so popular. Our use of the diary method, combined with interviews, is also a novel attempt at exploring Facebook use that yielded us insights about what users experience when they use Facebook, insights that would have otherwise been taken for granted. We propose that the framework we found in this study—of understanding the experience of Facebook as an experience of varying degrees of personal control—can be applied to understanding other social experiences as well.



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