

Family Communication, Privacy, and Facebook

Eric M. Fife, LuAnn LaCava & C. Leigh Nelson

Abstract

Four focus groups were conducted to explore how college students communicate with family members through Facebook. Communication Privacy Management served as the theoretical basis for the analysis, which suggested students balance privacy concerns with a desire to maintain and strengthen familial relationships. Participants described largely positive experiences communicating with family members on Facebook.

Scholars have studied family communication from a variety of theoretical perspectives and in any number of contexts over the last 20 years. The meteoric rise of Facebook membership has also spawned a tremendous amount of research. However, no study has yet carefully considered privacy and other relational implications of communication via Facebook with respect to family relationships. This study involves using a series of focus groups to investigate the positive and negative ramifications of privacy and other key relational concepts as family members communicate via Facebook. It utilizes the perspective of Communication Boundary Management (Petronio, 2002) in discussing issues related to disclosure and privacy, while introducing other concepts which might be further explored in future research.

Eric M. Fife and C. Leigh Nelson are Associate Professors in the School of Communication Studies at James Madison University. LuAnn LaCava is in law school at Duquesne University. Correspondence can be directed to fifeem@jmu.edu.

Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the world, with over 750 million “active users” (About Facebook, 2011). It is one of several such sites, defined by Boyd and Ellison (2008) as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). The primary purpose of using such sites is not to seek out new relationships, but to enhance communication with individuals who are already in a social network – even though people will sometimes accept friend requests from users they do not know personally (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). When it was originally founded in 2004, Facebook was limited to a single college campus; quickly, it became a staple of college student social life at campuses across the country. As Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, and Hughes noted, “Student life without Facebook is almost unthinkable” (2009, p. 83). Facebook’s influence, however, has expanded well beyond the college environment. Over time, Facebook gradually relaxed its rules for membership, to the point that now anyone with an email address can join (Kornblum, 2007). As Facebook has changed its membership standards, its membership has grown astronomically and the demographics of that membership has shifted. For instance, as of 2009 the fastest-growing group of people on Facebook was women over 50 – many of whom might be parents of college-aged young adults (Sutter, 2009).

Though academic Facebook research has proliferated greatly in the last few years, relatively little research has addressed the implications of college students communicating with their parents and other family members through Facebook. The minimal research and popular press speculation which has investigated this phenomenon already appears dated, and has examined such communication in only a limited way. Not long after Facebook allowed non-college students to join, Kornblum (2007) interviewed several college students who were appalled by the thought of older adults (including professors and parents) being their friends on Facebook. Even two years later, research by West, Lewis, and Currie (2009) found that although college students reported that most of their friends were on Facebook, only

one participant had a parent on Facebook. Other family members were not discussed in that study.

Privacy and Facebook

Though research on family communication on Facebook is very limited, scholarship related to privacy and identity concerns is somewhat more extensive. As Boyd and Ellison (2008) suggest, some early research and popular press discussion of Facebook emphasized privacy concerns related to unauthorized release of information, leading to identity theft. More recent research has continued to explore this important concern, while also considering privacy issues related to impression management. Researchers have suggested that although college-aged Facebook researchers are familiar with privacy settings (which change with some regularity on Facebook), they are not always careful to incorporate those settings in such a way that their privacy is protected (Butler, McCann, & Thomas, 2011; Debatin et al., 2009). In fact, Debatin et al. found that participants were not overly concerned about privacy issues unless they had a particularly negative experience with privacy invasion, as in the case of one student whose profile was repeatedly hacked (2009). Chaulk and Jones (2011) point out that a lack of caution regarding privacy issues could have even more dire consequences, including online obsessive relational intrusion and stalking. As they suggest, this sort of monitoring behavior is made easy by Facebook, since "it is near to impossible to determine who has been visiting one's space on Facebook and how often" (p. 250). Boyd (2008) argued that the "Newsfeed" feature on Facebook is particularly problematic with respect to privacy concerns, because it highlights behavior that users might not otherwise have discovered, without the need to intentionally visit friends' pages.

Facebook allows users some technological control over privacy-related issues, in a number of ways. Users can create groups of "friends" who are allowed to view different sorts of content; some friends might only see a profile picture, while others can see the entire profile including pictures and the "wall." Facebook allows users to send private messages (like e-mail), or make messages more public by posting them on a person's "wall." For the extremely privacy-conscious, Facebook allows users even to make themselves unavailable if another person is searching for them. Facebook has changed

its privacy settings over the years, making it potentially difficult for longtime users to keep up with those changes.

In communicating with family members on Facebook, college students are less likely to be concerned about hacking, identity theft and online obsessive relational intrusion, and more concerned about controlling the information which allows them to proffer a preferred identity. In other kinds of communication with family members, college students are better able to control and monitor information that might be stigmatizing to them in some way; however, such control can be difficult on Facebook. Brandtzaeg, Luders, and Skjetne (2010) note that “the [social] network asserts control over individual users by co-creating their self-presentation” (p. 1023). Some aspects of Facebook communication can be easily controlled by its users, including a profile picture and status updates. Others, however, such as public messages on one’s “wall” and the “tagging” of photographs cannot be controlled by users. Though people can “untag” photos and remove messages on a wall, others may already have seen these messages unless users are constantly monitoring their profiles. Anyone using social networking sites and maintaining any sort of identity-related presence on the Internet risks people finding out information about themselves that they did not wish known. As Tom Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, and Walther point out: “Communication technology has evolved beyond the means by which senders had more or less complete control over the impression-related information that receivers could observe” (2008, p. 531).

Additionally, college students find themselves increasingly managing multiple “identities” on Facebook, as the site continues to grow and people continue to send them friend requests (Tufekci, 2008). Students may wish to be perceived as studious by family members, but sociable by peers. Only through careful, thoughtful control of identity-related information and disclosures can students hope to successfully juggle these multiple facets of identity, and some struggle with this process. Debatin et al. (2009) found that “perceived benefits of online social networking outweighed risks of disclosing personal information,” at least for their participants (p. 100). Even college students who are willing to risk disclosing personal information, however, might consider how such information could influence how they are perceived by others – particularly those as important as family.

Communication Privacy Management provides a well-researched, practical theoretical framework for discussing the risks, behaviors, and consequences associated with online disclosure.

Communication Privacy Management

Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM) is designed to extend earlier, linear models of self-disclosure in a way that captures the complexities involved with managing private information. It is based on series of premises about the nature of communication generally, the importance of disclosure and the means through which social networks are involved in ongoing disclosure processes. CPM assumes that "the process of disclosure is inherently dialectical, meaning that when people disclose, they manage a friction – a push and pull – of revealing or concealing private information" (Petronio & Dunham, 2008, p. 211). This assumption reflects the dialectical approach of scholars such as Rawlins (1992) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996), and is combined with other principles to extend the theory beyond Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) classic openness/closedness dialectical tension. Petronio (2007) extends this critical assumption of the theory by spelling out five specific principles on which the theory is based.

The first maxim of the theory is that people claim ownership of their private information. As such, they "have the right to control the flow of private information to others" (Petronio, 2007, p. 219), which is the second maxim. Because they assert control over this information, people also will construct rules for managing their privacy, and revealing this information; that people carefully construct such rules is the third principle of the theory.

When individuals choose to reveal information to others, they assume that others will cooperate with them in managing their private information, still maintaining a degree of ownership over that disclosure. Petronio (2007) refers to this fourth principle as the process of making others "shareholders of the information," and notes that people might then co-construct rules for continued management of disclosure (p. 219). The fifth principle suggests that "boundary turbulence" occurs when "there is a disruption in the coordination of privacy rules or when someone's privacy boundary is blatantly violated" (p. 219). Though the tenets of this theory have not been applied

to family communication on Facebook, the theory has been applied to both family communication (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003) and Facebook individually (Deverniero & Hosek, 2011), providing insight into how it might be utilized in that specific context.

CPM, Facebook, and Family Communication

Several studies of CPM and online privacy, two involving Facebook, provide some direction for the present research, even though family communication was not the focus of this earlier scholarship. In the first study, Mazer, Murphy, and Simons (2007) used CPM as part of their study of instructor disclosures on Facebook. Given the nature of their methodology and the specific context they explored, Mazer et al. chose to focus on those controllable aspects of Facebook, noting that “the nature of computer-mediated communication allows teachers to determine how they appear on Facebook” (2007, p. 13). Thus, teachers could “own” their disclosures. The nature of teacher disclosures did have an effect on student perceptions of teachers, with higher levels of disclosure leading to increased affective learning and an improved classroom climate. The authors cautioned, however, that excessive or certain types of disclosure might damage instructor credibility. A related study from DeVerniero and Hosek (2011) also considered unintended instructor disclosure (at least to that audience), pointing out that students would sometimes track down instructor Facebook profiles without their instructors’ knowledge or consent. DeVerniero and Hosek point out that this ability to gather information without an instructor’s consent, including possibly stigmatizing information, may cause some problems in the instructor/student relationship – but note that overall, the relationship benefited from students seeing the instructor as “a human being” (2011, p. 437).

The other relevant study was not conducted using Facebook specifically, but nonetheless involved an online environment. Child, Pearson, and Petronio (2009) considered CPM issues with respect to blogging, noting that although blogs are intentionally constructed they may find an unintended audience – as with the instructor Facebook profiles described above. And as with Facebook, bloggers may manage privacy technologically through the use of customization tools. But as Child et al. note, “college students may discover their parents have access to their blog through computer surveillance

technology and adapt their permeability or linkage rules in light of discovering such information” (2009, p. 2081).

In a study that directly examined family communication from a CPM lens, Petronio, Jones and Morr (2003) noted that families might develop some privacy rules involving insiders, or individual groups of family members, and additional rules for disclosures outside of the family. These rules might even be passed down to children through a socialization process. Boundary turbulence leads to reconsideration of these rules, or perhaps an explicit conversation about the co-construction of rules which may have been implicit. Petronio (2007) also points out that “privacy dilemmas in families cannot be solved. The dynamics are too complex” and thus researchers should focus on finding ways to “teach families ways to manage the fallout of privacy dilemmas, instead of holding out for a solution” (p. 221).

Research Questions

As noted above, Facebook poses particular problems for college students wishing to maintain privacy boundaries with respect to their families. They may be concerned about family members knowing too much about their activities in college, while also wanting to share those activities with friends. Because participation in Facebook continues to grow for older adults, and because Facebook has not been investigated as a means of family communication, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How do college students manage issues of privacy and disclosure with respect to family members on Facebook?

Though clearly privacy is a central issue for college students communicating with families on Facebook, it is not the only relevant issue. Facebook may involve itself in other important family communication processes, ranging from the co-construction of family stories to allowing for the provision of support. While privacy concerns may be problematic for students, other ways in which Facebook might be used could be very positive for college students and their families.

Therefore, this second research question is proposed:

RQ2: How do college students describe other aspects of their Facebook-related interactions with family members?

Method

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 27 female students at a large, southeastern university. Students were recruited primarily from upper-level communication studies courses, and received extra credit for their participation in many cases. Upper-level communication classes at the university that supplied participants are approximately 80% female, which led to the entirely female composition of those groups. Of the 27 students, almost half (14) were seniors, 9 were juniors, and four were sophomores or first-year students. All of the students were 18-22 years old.

Focus groups, defined by Morgan (1996) as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 106), were used because they allow for more open-ended responses than survey methodology (Fontana & Frey, 1993). Also, focus groups allow participants to work together to co-construct ideas, possibly leading to discussion of issues the researchers had not originally considered (Southwell, Blake, & Torres, 2005). The emergence of ideas not explicitly considered by the researchers is particularly important when the phenomenon under investigation has not been previously explored, as is the case in this study. Also, though CPM researchers have used a variety of methodological approaches (e.g., Petronio & Dunham, 2008), focus groups allow for the kind of detailed, thoughtful discussion of privacy-related issues that would seem appropriate in the context of Facebook usage.

In this study, focus group participants had been using Facebook for 3-7 years, with an average of 5.2 years. Focus groups had 5 to 8 participants, and lasted from about 30 to 70 minutes. Questions were asked according to a semi-structured protocol, with the trained moderator (one of the authors) having the freedom to depart from the protocol as necessary. Questions were grouped into several broad categories. The first set of questions addressed basic demographic items, including sex and how long participants had been using Facebook. The next set of five questions addressed technological issues related to privacy protection, and were suggested by some of the earlier Facebook research that emphasized such concerns (e.g., Boyd & Ellison, 2008); items such as “Are you aware of the different privacy settings available on Facebook” were included. The following set of four questions addressed the extent to which the students had fam-

ily members as friends on Facebook; those questions were designed to establish the scope and importance of family communication on Facebook, and were suggested by studies like that of West, Lewis and Currie (2009), who found minimal parent/child interaction described on Facebook.

The next set of six questions was designed to encourage the groups to discuss privacy issues on Facebook, and were suggested by CPM scholarship (e.g., Petronio, 2002). Questions asked in this section included, "Which members of your family are you the most comfortable with seeing all of your Facebook profile." Finally, the last several questions asked more generally about positive and negative experiences with family communication on Facebook, given the relative paucity of research about even these general sorts of experiences. The full set of questions is included in Appendix A.

One of the authors transcribed the results of the focus groups. Next, thematic analysis (as described by Press & Cole, 1995) was conducted by a second author, working from the transcripts as well as notes provided by the other facilitator. This process consisted of several careful readings of the verbatim transcripts and notes, as relevant themes began to emerge. As patterns or clusters of comments were repeated across groups, they were labeled as themes. Once themes were identified, representative quotes exemplifying those themes were selected. Those themes and quotes are presented below.

Results and Discussion

"We all have family on Facebook – but not all family are equal" When asked a series of questions about the existence of family members on Facebook, the participants in the focus groups all identified family members who were friends, ranging from cousins, to siblings, to aunts and uncles, to parents. Participants noted in early questions that although they were concerned about privacy issues, they were generally more concerned about those issues with respect to the general public, and less about any friends (including family). They also expressed concerns about prospective employers seeing something on Facebook that might hurt their employment opportunities, along with "creepy stalkers." In line with CPM (Petronio, 2002), students generally took ownership of their disclosures with respect to the public at large, and established explicit rules (manifest in Facebook's

settings for how one's profile is viewed by the public) for which elements of their profile could be seen. Interestingly, students were less cautious with disclosures involving family members, as noted below; this distinction, however, points to a careful process of rule construction, which is in line with the assumptions of CPM.

When asked more specific questions regarding the nature of particular material kept private on Facebook, and their relative concerns about various family members, answers varied tremendously. Participants did point out that they were more comfortable with some family members as friends on Facebook than others, for a variety of reasons. One factor that clearly influences rules for disclosure on Facebook is the age of a family member. Some students expressed concern about older family members seeing aspects of their Facebook profiles, notably images and videos. They were particularly concerned that older family members might judge them, without even giving them a chance to discuss what may be a misleading picture. As one participant remarked, "You don't know exactly what they're interpreting. They could see something and not talk to you about it, and see it in a certain way. They don't know the real story." Also, the participants pointed out that Facebook, by its nature, tends to emphasize events during which something interesting actually happens, like a party – so most people don't post pictures of their study groups. As one said, "I guess they would only be seeing the fun side." Another noted, "no one is going to bring your camera while you're studying in the library."

Age of family members was also a consideration for students concerned about being role models for younger family members. As one participant noted, "my cousin got hers when she was 11 and I didn't let her be my friend until she was a little older. Until I felt like . . . she was old enough to understand. And not I guess do some of the things that we did." Finally, participants also noted their awareness of how their willingness to have family members as "friends" on Facebook was influenced by their own age, being more willing to add family members as friends as the participants aged and matured – caring less about how they were viewed by family, or changing activities as they matured, or both. Students also considered the intimacy of the relationship when making decisions about forming "friendships" with family members on Facebook, and in monitoring their privacy. "The

closer they are the more I let them see. Just a general rule,” as one said.

Because age (both of the student and the family member) and the intimacy of the family relationship are important factors for students in considering privacy issues on Facebook, it is reasonable to assume that rules regarding privacy disclosure evolve over time. Though the focus group questions emphasized the current state of the relationship, the repeated reference to evolving aspects of relationships suggested that students will both create individual rules for family members and allow those rules to evolve as the relationship changes. For example, a student who may be reluctant to display aspects of her site when she is a college student and her sister is a 15-year-old with a new account may develop entirely different rules about privacy just a few years later, when the sibling enters college and the student has graduated. A college student may also adjust rules as family relationships become more or less intimate over time, as clearly such relationships are not static.

“On balance – the relationship matters more than the privacy”

Though students expressed concerns about how they might be seen by family members, the vast majority of the participants were both willing to accept family members as friends and reluctant to restrict their “friends” access to their profile. Even knowing that they might be perceived in a way which was not in line with how they wanted to be seen, and knowing they could not always control various elements of their profiles, the participants chose to embrace family relationships online. As one said, “For me, family is family. I am very set on family . . . I am very open with my family.”

The importance of family relationships is certainly one reason why participants were generally willing to accept them as friends, but they also recognized the relational consequences of either NOT accepting them as friends or establishing restrictions on what family members could see. Though a few participants did protect portions of their profile from family members, several others remarked on the difficulty of doing so, noting that family members (except those who were not very familiar with the medium) might eventually figure out that they could not see all of the content, and be offended.

An even greater relational offense might be refusing to accept a

friend request from a family member. Participants suspected that such a refusal had the potential to damage a relationship – and many were simply not willing to take that risk. As one said, “most of my family I interact with on a regular basis, [so] I feel like they would know” about a friend request not being accepted. “So I just accept it.” Another noted, “I’d probably end up accepting them so I didn’t cause a rift in whatever the relationship was. They take Facebook a little too seriously sometimes.” This approach, the willingness to sacrifice some privacy for the sake of continuing an important relationship, is in line with the findings of Debatin et al. (2009), who found that their participants were willing to risk privacy invasions for the benefits of Facebook. It also can be explained from a CPM perspective; though students still expressed a desire to own their disclosures, they were also willing to risk losing some control for the sake of a relationship (Petronio, 2002, 2007).

“Boundary turbulence can be a problem – but I got this”

The concept of “boundary turbulence” in CPM, which occurs when rules for disclosure are violated, can be of particular concern when there are so many opportunities in Facebook for revealing information about another. Participants expressed frustration with friends who might leak information to family members (notably parents) that they might not want family members to know, thus breaking implicit rules for control of such information. Several participants noted their concerns about friends tagging them in inappropriate pictures, writing on their walls or commenting on their status lines in a way that might disclose information they would prefer to have kept private. From a CPM perspective, the friends might be seen as “stakeholders” with respect to the participants’ private information (Petronio & Dunham, 2008). Despite the risks, the students chose to maintain family relationships on Facebook.

Several students told stories about issues related to boundary turbulence, not always involving the participants themselves. For example, one participant described a situation in which a parent had found out by reading her sister’s boyfriend’s wall that the boyfriend was visiting another woman. Another noted that her father had seen her drinking alcohol in a photo, and made a comment about it. In any cases in which boundary turbulence was a problem, how-

ever, students almost always described how they had managed that turbulence successfully, sometimes even turning the situation into a positive one. The student whose father had seen her drinking noted that “My dad when I got home said I should probably take it off. That is when it all started clicking that I am sending the wrong message.” Another noted that “my uncle one day at a family get-together took out his cell phone and showed pictures of me out on a Friday night with my friends. . . you don’t know what happens when you’re not there.” However, she concluded this story by noting, “in the end it’s family and they can think what they want and they can still judge.” She made no mention of “defriending” this family member, or even changing her privacy settings to limit his access to her profile.

Participants seemed to feel their management of boundary turbulence could be assisted by two significant factors. First, participants felt that they maintained a reasonable degree of technological control over the medium. They seemed comfortable with their ability to prevent and/or appropriately respond to privacy issues when they developed, by untagging photos, limiting family access, or engaging in other practices related to the technology platform. Second, they felt more comfortable managing turbulence in those situations where they had face-to-face or other forms of regular contact with family members, enabling them to communicatively manage those situations shortly after they arose. When participants felt they lacked either technological or relational power, they tended to report feeling more vulnerable.

“Facebook plays a very positive role in family communication”

The fact that participants were willing to put up with privacy and identity concerns suggests that Facebook can also be involved in some very positive aspects of family communication, and this is borne out by participants’ responses. Though participants noted both positive and negative aspects of their Facebook communication with family, both the nature of their remarks and the simple willingness to continue to have family members as “friends” suggests the strong positive nature of many of their interactions.

Some participants viewed Facebook as another way to keep in touch with family, particularly family members they did not see very often. As one noted, “I want to talk to them and I want to catch up with them, and Facebook gave me that home base of where to do it

when I am physically apart from them.” In one focus group, all of the participants said they actually preferred using Facebook to keep in touch over any other communication medium.

Though keeping in touch was perhaps the most commonly cited benefit of Facebook for families, it was far from the only one. Many of the participants provided stories involving how Facebook had been very beneficial for their families, in any of a number of ways. One noted that her grandmother had received messages of condolences from many people after her grandfather had died, and found it very comforting. Another pointed out that Facebook can help someone remember family birthdays, while another referred to Facebook as the “main conversation starter” among family members. One participant noted that her sister put her in her profile picture “which is really sentimental to me because I don’t think of us as being that close. I think she has been trying to mend our relationship.” These stories, and many others like them, suggest many positive uses for Facebook in family communication patterns.

Conclusion

Overall, family communication on Facebook as described by these participants both mirrors existing Facebook scholarship and supports the use of CPM as a way of further studying the phenomenon. Participant concerns about privacy, as well as how those concerns are balanced with respect to continuing to enjoy important relationships, are supported by scholars who have studied privacy issues (e.g., Debatin et al., 2009). As Facebook continues to evolve, participants will continue to develop rules and expectations with respect to protecting that privacy. As Tufekci (2008) noted, college students “are not wading in these waters without any reflection, but they may also not have fully adjusted to the implications of self-presentation in online environments” (p. 35).

Beyond privacy issues, the importance of using social networking sites to strengthen existing relationships appears to apply to family as much as it does to friendships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Participants reported a number of positive uses of Facebook in family communication, including maintaining contact, providing support, starting conversations and representing closeness through photographs. Participants also reported some problems associated with family communication on Facebook, as noted by other researchers (West et al.,

2009); however, on the whole this study contradicts earlier research which tended to focus on the negative aspects of having family members (notably parents) as Facebook friends. This contradiction does not imply flaws in earlier research; instead, it points to the ongoing evolution of Facebook as a communication medium.

This study also suggests the utility of using CPM as a theoretical perspective for continuing Facebook scholarship. Participants clearly felt ownership of their potential disclosures, and would use privacy settings to control disclosures outside of their “friends.” They continued to have a sense of rules for disclosure in the online environment, and boundary turbulence might result when those rules were violated. Interestingly, they were willing to give up some degree of control of that information to participate in Facebook’s environment. This willingness to give up control does not violate one of the central tenets of CPM, but does suggest that it may need to be modified for an online environment – particularly one in which privacy cannot be completely controlled by its participants.

Limitations

This study’s applicability is somewhat limited outside of a college environment, given its focus on college student perceptions. Though this may represent a good starting point, groups outside of a college environment also should be studied. Additionally, all of the participants in this research study were female; the courses from which these students were taken are about 80 percent female, so while this number is not too far from the demographic breakdown in those courses, it is entirely possible that men might have somewhat of a different perspective. Petronio (2002, 2007) noted that sex differences might occur in how people manage disclosures, so future studies might include male participants. Given the relatively small sample size of any focus group study, some demographic groups will inevitably be left out; future research could also address issues of this sample related to age and ethnic diversity. One final limitation concerns the nature of the questions asked. In retrospect, asking about the means by which those relationships were formed (including whether the student or family member initiated the friend request) would have added valuable information to the study. Further research might address this shortcoming.

Directions for Future Research

A number of additional research studies are suggested by the present investigation. Many participants referenced age as an important demographic variable which affected their family communication on Facebook, and age might be worthy of further study – particularly with the graying demographics of Facebook. It would be interesting to study parents and other family members of college students to uncover some of their perceptions about disclosure and identity issues; some research (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010) has suggested that as age increases, concern for privacy (and management of disclosure) also increases.

Scholars might also further investigate the positive aspects of Facebook in family communication described above. Facebook might allow family members to grieve together, to share photos in a way which strengthens those relationships, or feel closer when apart. Such research is particularly important, given the contrast with earlier scholarship in which participants viewed family communication on Facebook as limited – even intrusive.

Additional investigations might be qualitative or quantitative. As Petronio and Dunham (2008) pointed out, “Unlike many theories that fit neatly within one particular methodological paradigm, CPM has proven to be a useful theoretical tool for interpretivists and post-positivists alike” (p. 310). Given a qualitative investigation such as this one to identify some of the critical issues, a quantitative study might follow up on some of those same issues from a CPM or other theoretical perspective. Such continued research is important, as more family members communicate on Facebook. In discussing Facebook’s impact on friendship, Beer argued, “In short, it is possible that SNS, as they become mainstream, might well have an influence on what friendship means, how it is understood, and ultimately, how it is played out” (2008, p. 521). Over time, a similar statement might apply to family relationships – and it is thus critical for researchers to better understand how Facebook can influence families.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

1. How long have you been on Facebook?
2. Approximately how many hours per day do you use Facebook?
3. Are you aware of the different privacy settings available on Facebook?

4. In what ways have you attempted to make elements of your Facebook profile private to the general public? (probe) Why have you made elements of your profile private? (i.e. employers, school admissions offices, stalking, etc...)
5. In what ways have you attempted to make elements of your Facebook profile private to acquaintances on Facebook?
6. In what ways have you made elements of your Facebook page private to friends?
7. Are there other ways you think Facebook could be more private?
8. Do any members of your extended or immediate family have Facebook profiles?
9. Which members of your family are you friends with on Facebook (aunt, uncle, cousin, sibling, parent, grandparents, etc)
10. Do you feel more comfortable being Facebook friends with some family members over others? Why?
11. How do you think your relationship with a family member affects whether or not you are Facebook friends?
12. How do you think your relationship with a family member affects whether or not you allow them to see certain elements of your profile? (probe) Photos, Wall posts, status updates, relationship status?
13. What information are you comfortable sharing with every family member?
14. What information are you not comfortable with sharing with family members?
15. Which members of your family are you the most comfortable with seeing all of your Facebook profile? (probe) Which elements, if any, do you still hide from them?
16. Which members of your family are you the least comfortable with seeing all of your Facebook profile? (probe) Which elements do you hide from them?
17. In what ways might Facebook allow members of your family to gather information about you that they otherwise would not know?
18. How do you think Facebook is beneficial to familial relationships?
19. How do you think Facebook can be detrimental to familial relationships?
20. Has any member of your family ever confronted you about information they saw on your profile?
21. Please describe a positive experience between you and a family member on Facebook.
22. Please describe a negative experience between you and a family member on Facebook.
23. Why do you choose to keep certain elements of your Facebook profile

private from family members?

24. Do you think you will ever remove the privacy features?