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A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF ADOLESCENT FEMALES' USE OF  
SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES

by

JANINE PATE  
B.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in Communication  
in the Nicholson School of Communication  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring 2010

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to explore the ways adolescent females, age 14 through 17, utilized social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook for communication, self-presentation and identity development purposes. Uses and gratifications theory was used as a framework for identifying the participants' motivations for heavily using these websites, which allow users to post pictures, interests and updates for their friends to view and interact with online. Using a qualitative method, one preliminary focus group and ten in-depth interviews were conducted, totaling fifteen female participants between the ages of 14 and 17. Interview questions covered topics such as peer interactions through social networking sites, posting personal content to their profile pages, self-presentations through pictures and text, creating and maintaining friendships through these sites, and negative and positive feedback received through comments. Results indicated that the participants frequently used social networking websites for five main gratifications: Information Sharing, Convenient Communication, Self-Expression, Friendship Formation and Social Support.

To my parents for letting me to do what I actually want to do. They have both offered me unconditional support, inspiration and assistance throughout this process, and my life.

To all the incredible adolescent participants that lent me their time and stories, and allowed me to eavesdrop on their lives. This project could not have been completed without you.

Also, a special thanks to Erin Lovell for letting me vent, keeping me motivated and being an all around awesome person.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe an immense amount of gratitude to my thesis committee: Dr. Maria Santana, Dr. Kimiko Akita and especially my thesis chair, Dr. Denise DeLorme. Dr. DeLorme's help and guidance throughout this project was invaluable, and I could not have completed this without her assistance. On countless occasions I was at a loss for how to proceed, and her support helped me to stay on track and move forward.

I also appreciate the support from the rest of the UCF Graduate Communication faculty, especially Dr. Burt Pryor and Kirsten Seitz, who were always on hand to answer my limitless questions, address my concerns and reassure me that I would finish this project.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Using the Internet primarily as a communication device has become commonplace. Adolescents, more than any other age group, have effectively intertwined new communication technologies into their everyday lives (Bird, 2006, p. 1). In 2002, the average time spent communicating online for 13 to 17 year olds was 7 hours per week (Maczewski, 2002). That number has steadily increased – in 2006, teens reported communicating online for 14 hours per week; currently, it is 16.7 hours per week (Goldwasser, 2008; Turner, 2006).

One corner of the Internet that may account for this online communication explosion is the popularity of social networking websites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com, the latter of which became the most popular site on the World Wide Web in 2006, surpassing even MySpace's claim that it grabs 5% of all U.S. Internet traffic (Bird, 2006; Ellison, et al., 2007). Both of these interactive websites operate on the same premises – users can share photos, comment on each others' profiles (which display the users' photo and other identifying information), list their likes and interests and reveal personal information such as their relationship status and close friendships (ECAR Research, 2008). Social networking sites allow users to create personalized and unique content, letting them “present themselves, articulate their social networks and establish or maintain connections with others” by displaying themselves through photos and links to friends' profile pages (Ellison, et al., 2007, p. 1143).

According to Watkins (2009), these online sites are thought to help accommodate adolescents' “obsessive need to connect” and communicate, allowing them to access their social networks at any time, for any reason (p. 19). Here, adolescents can express themselves and visibly define their social circles (Urista, et al., 2008). This current generation of adolescents,

the “Net Generation,” may be the first to experience this dramatic shift in the ways they communicate and display themselves to each other and the world (Tapscott, 1998; Thiel, 2003).

Social networking sites, while only a few years old (MySpace began in 2003, Facebook in 2004), have redefined the ways consumers communicate, interact with others and identify themselves. These types of sites allow individuals to “play an active role in the socialization process and in constructing their own identity” (Urista, et al., 2008, p. 217). Adolescents in particular have grown up with online communication and social networking sites; they will never know a time without this form of media (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001). According to a recent survey, 70% of U.S. teenagers have online social networking profiles as compared to 35% of U.S. adults (Lenhart, 2009). Among those teens who do maintain profiles, 91% use their online profiles to communicate with friends daily, greatly outweighing the 29% who reported socializing with friends in person on a daily basis (2009). The idea that a medium such as this is changing the ways new generations are communicating makes this topic worthy of study and provides unique research opportunities.

As “the media profoundly shapes what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it”, this new media phenomenon of online social networking is influencing the Net Generation’s ideas about themselves and where they fit, both online and offline (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001, p. 309). This generation “almost never distinguishes between the online and offline versions of themselves” as they have grown up with these two counterparts; they have converged into one (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 20). According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), adolescents today largely see their online profile self as an extension of their real-world, physical self; as they edit their profiles or add and delete friends or interests, they

seem to be editing, adding and deleting aspects of their real lives. Adolescents are literally able to write themselves into being by creating or editing an online profile (Zhao, et al., 2008).

Previous studies have addressed similar issues by examining the ways adolescents communicate through chat rooms or Instant Messaging and what the effects of such communication may be on their well-being, identity formation, self-esteem, friendship formation, social competence and communication skills (e.g. Eijnden, et al, 2008; Gross, et al., 2002; Thiel, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). The importance of learning communication, social competence and friendship formation skills during adolescence all play vital roles in paving the way towards their future social and emotional well-being as they grow into young adults (Harman, et al., 2005; Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Another aspect of social networking sites that has been addressed is the feedback feature available (ECAR Research, 2008). With the feedback feature, users' virtual "friends" are granted access to comment on other users' photos, blogs, interests, relationship status, etc. Anything that appears on their profile is available for comment. To be a "friend" on a social networking site means to allow access to view and interact with each others' profile content and information. Other "friends" are also able to see these comments, literal observations, and remarks regarding personal aspects of an individual's life. Based on this textual feedback, users have the opportunity to instantly alter the information appearing on their profiles (i.e. choosing what to delete or post) based on others' opinions and comments. These profiles can be re-written, re-worded and re-created depending on what the adolescent deems important about him or herself at that particular time, and/or based on what type of feedback he or she has received.

As current trends point to social networking sites as the online communication medium of choice among the adolescent community, it becomes increasingly relevant to study the

meanings and importance these users are placing on social networking websites as communication tools and the methods of publicly displaying their identities during this impressionable and essential life stage (Brumberg, 1997; Lenhart, 2009).

The current study seeks to explore the use of social networking sites among adolescent females in order to discover the meanings they attach to its use. Although adolescence typically begins around age eleven and can last until the late teen years as children begin to develop adult physical characteristics, the present study will focus on females ages 14 through 17.

Females are currently more likely to have a social networking profile than males, with 86% of females aged 15 to 17 reporting maintaining an online profile versus 69% of males the same age (Lenhart, 2009). Females also have been observed to have a more intricate and complicated relationship with the mass media than males, as ideals of perfection and beauty dominate the pages of magazines, television and movie screens and online sources (Brumberg, 1997; Lewis & Finders, 2002). Heavy media influences, as well as social pressures based on high media standards have been associated with emotional chaos that may manifest in mental health issues such as eating disorders and depression (Brumberg, 1997).

The present study will first review the previous literature concerning relevant topics among the adolescent population, particularly their uses of online communication in relation to identity issues and social interaction. Uses and gratifications theory literature will also be reviewed and discussed. Uses and gratifications will be applied as a theoretical framework for analyzing data in relation to gratifications sought and obtained from the use of social networking websites by adolescent females. Next, the qualitative methodology will be outlined. The results from the data will then be presented, followed by a discussion and directions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have explored several adolescent issues relevant to the present investigation. Adolescence as an important stage in human development will first be discussed, followed by a discussion of female adolescence in particular. Then, a review of research literature concerning adolescent use of the Internet, online communication and social networking sites will be presented. Finally, uses and gratifications theory literature will be reviewed to set the stage for its application as a theoretical framework for the present study.

### Research on Adolescence as a Psychological Developmental Stage

The importance of forming a sense of one's unique identity during adolescence has been a particular interest of researchers since the 1950s and 60s with psychologists and communication researchers alike focusing on the period between childhood and adulthood as an essential time of transition (e.g. Burke, 1980; Brumberg, 1997; Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1996; Maczweski, 2002; Tapscott, 1998; Thiel, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Identity, in terms of adolescent psychology, is defined as "a feeling of distinctness from others" and feelings of belonging and self-worth among society, and has been one of the most researched topics concerning the adolescents (Rogers, 1962, p. 51). Interest in adolescent identity development continues today, with psychologists McLean and Breen (2009) stating, "identity development is the prominent developmental task adolescents face as they are pushed by both psychological and social factors to define the self" (p. 703).

In addition to the creation of identity, characteristics of social competence such as the formation of social support systems, friendships and communication skills play important roles

in paving the way towards a healthy adulthood (Harman, et al, 2005; Mesch & Talmud, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). In this case, “social competence” is defined as the ability to form new friendships and maintain these friendships effectively (Valkenburg & Peter, 2005; 2007). According to Erikson (1968), a prominent psychologist who focused on developmental life stages, if identity is not explored during adolescence, detrimental effects may be present within social interaction skills, self-esteem and communication abilities, all which may negatively influence social competence. A failure to achieve social competence may cause “awkwardness in human relationships, a life of uncertain and limited friendships and loneliness in old age” (Hemming, 1967, p. 53).

Friendship formation and learning interpersonal communication skills are also “major developmental tasks” during the adolescent life stage (Hemming, 1967, p. 5). A lack of peer friendships during this stage has been shown to decrease adolescents’ self-esteem and self-image when compared to those who have an active social life (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2005). Amichai-Hamburger, et al. (2005), chatted with adolescents online and then asked them a series of questions concerning their social lives. They found that those adolescents with close, positive peer relationships were able to identify themselves in more self-assured terms, and were more confident in their social lives overall (2005).

During adolescence, essential skills such as communication, cooperation, tolerance, intimacy, disclosure and flexibility can also be gained simply from preserving and constructing personal relationships with peers (Rubin & Windahl, 1986). The absence of peer relationships during adolescence has been linked to traits such as aggressiveness, apathy and pessimism, according to an online survey measuring friendship formation during the adolescent years using a scale constructed by the researchers (Mesch & Talmud, 2006). A similarly conducted survey in

2005, utilizing the quantitative measurements of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Social Anxiety Scale for Children and the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills, linked social phobia, social anxiety and mental health problems to a lack of peer interactions when looking at adolescents and the strength of their peer relationships (Harman, et al., 2005).

Personal relationships during adolescence also provide a “sounding board against which one’s identity can be validated” and reworked if necessary, according to a series of online interviews which questioned teens’ self-concept as compared to their peers’ (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, p. 45). Adolescents shape their personalities largely based on how others view them, or how they *think* others view them, and these interview questions measured the participants’ responses to inquiries concerning their peer relationships and their closeness to friends in relation to their own self-concepts (2007). According to the quantitative data obtained by these interviews, the teenage years are typically “characterized by a heightened vulnerability about the self” and positive feedback from friends, family members and peers can assist in alleviating some of that vulnerability, in turn increasing self-esteem and self-concept (p. 45). Additionally, verbal feedback from friends and family members can aid adolescents in shaping and claiming certain aspects of their identities, eliminating or highlighting qualities that are deemed negative or positive by others (Stern, 2004).

The importance of friendship formation during this life stage raises concern over the increased amount of friendship formation and social interaction that is occurring online, and how this will affect the adolescent growth process (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Specifically, how will increased use of the Internet for social purposes influence this age group’s ability to make and keep friendships in their real lives, as well as their overall understanding of their own and others’ identity?



## Research on Adolescent Females' Identity Development

The majority of researchers who have recently examined adolescent identity development have focused specifically on females, as they are considered more vulnerable and sensitive to the opinions of others' and their environments during this life stage than are males (Phillips, 1998). During this stage, females balance their "new obligations and new freedoms" in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Driscoll, 2002, p. 56). According to Phillips (1998), who examined this topic through participant observations and personal interviews, "many of the issues that adolescents deal with... tend to affect girls differently from boys" both mentally and emotionally, and she contends that special attention and research should be focused on females during this stage (p.1).

Further, Phillips (1998) states, "Perhaps more than at any other life stage, girls in adolescence are involved in the sometimes frustrating, sometimes exciting, but always complex process of exploring and developing their identities" (p. 6). Females at this age have been found to place more importance on being able to define themselves among their peers and families than are males, wanting others to also be aware of their identities, according to Brumberg (1997), who researched the topic from the 1900s to the end of the 1990s.

According to psychologists studying adolescent development, females are often internally exploring personality and identity options, while simultaneously being more aware of what others perceive of them and taking this into account as they form opinions of themselves. One psychologist, Hall (1992) states, "a girl's self-knowledge [is] confined to the reflected knowledge others have of her" (p. 55); in other words, her identity begins to be developed based on how she feels others perceive her.

During the adolescent period, females largely look to their friends for scripts of who to become or how to behave, sometimes causing identity confusion if this image does not match the one she sees for herself (Pipher, 1994). Pipher (1994), who conducted a longitudinal study of adolescent females' development, states that with this type of identity confusion, "girls can [either] be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers, or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable" (p. 159). Pipher argues that at times they will behave in ways designed to impress their friends, rather than remaining in line with their true selves (1994). As stated previously, if females do not feel accepted by peers, they may not feel comfortable in defining their own unique values and opinions, which hinders their identity development process (Farmer, 2008). Farmer states that these girls should feel safe enough to express their own desires in order to grow into their own person, apart from their social and cultural identities (2008).

Contradicting influences for females' identity development also come from advertisements, television, and other media sources, all jumbling into cultural scripts that can lower females' self esteem if they feel they are not measuring up to the cultural and social ideals of femininity that bombard them (Driscoll, 2002; Phillips, 1998). Adolescent females commonly struggle with conflicting expectations from their families, peers and the media as they work to "explore the possibilities" of who they may become, often causing emotional disorders such as low self esteem or depression, both of which may manifest in physical disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, which have been shown to appear more frequently in females than males of the same age (Phillips, 2009, p. 4).

### Research on Adolescents' Use of the Internet and Online Communication

With identity exploration and peer relationships integral pieces in adolescent development, more research in the past decade has turned towards the examination of Internet use among the adolescent age group and its impact on these factors during an already tumultuous time (e.g. Eijnden & Meerkerk, 2008; Gross, et. al., 2002; Katz & Rice, 2002; LaFerle, et al., 1999; Leung, 2006; Tapscott, 1998). As stated earlier, the adolescent period can begin as early as age eleven and continue until the late teens, and researchers have utilized various subsets within this age range for the sample in their studies.

Some scholars have called adolescents “the defining users of the Internet”, making their utilization of this media source all the more fascinating to adults (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, p. 45). It also proves worrisome, as 40% of surveyed parents in 2000 stated that they felt “children who spent too much time on the Internet develop anti-social behavior”, illustrating this rising concern as Internet use became a daily ritual (Gross, et al., 2002, p. 1). According to a 2008 online survey conducted by Eijnden and Meerkerk, among respondents aged 12 to 15, 99% used the Internet, with 10 hours per week being the mean amount of use. This study also found that this amount of online communication was correlated with both depression and loneliness, but also that talking to friends online caused the adolescents to perceive positive feelings of regard by peers, adding to the confusion concerning positive and negative effects of online communication among this age group (2008).

According to Valkenburg and Peter (2007), during adolescence, the number of identities or self-concepts increases due to new interests, new friends and more self-reflexive thoughts.

The Internet allows the adolescent to explore all of these possible interests and changing feelings, according to a 2004 examination of adolescents' (age 14-18) home pages on the Internet (Stern, 2004). Stern used a content analysis coding system and observed the ways the adolescents described themselves and their interests on their home pages, tracking changes in mood and shifting interests. The adolescents also provided links to new and emerging interests and hobbies, allowing the researcher to visibly observe these changing identities, "indicating that the personal home pages under examination provided a place for their adolescent authors to express their developing identities in textual and multimedia fashions" (p. 238). As an example of this type of identity experimentation process, Katz and Rice (2002), discovered from their open-ended survey that, "the Internet brings all the parts of the self and unifies them into a single identity" as young teens reported using the Internet in pursuit of various interests (p. 282).

Maczewski (2002) conducted online interviews and found that respondents aged 13 through 19 acknowledged that their identities were always evolving because they were continuing to grow and learn as they straddled childhood and adulthood. According to survey responses, the Internet allows teens to conduct this exploration and growth process free of scrutiny from the outside world and without being monitored by peers or parents.

In terms of identity development and self-exploration, interpersonal interactions are seen to differ from online interactions (Bortree's, 2005). Bortree contacted 40 females who maintained personal blogs and interviewed them via email correspondence. Bortree found in her ethnographic research on adolescent females' interpersonal friendships in comparison to blogs kept on the Internet, when friends were present the respondents acted more reserved and in line with how they were known among their circle of friends. On the Internet, with no friends

present, the girls behaved more out of character, explored more information that was outside of the interests of the group and presented themselves in inflated and experimental ways.

Bortree (2005) found that the online freedom the participants felt cuts the physical ties and barriers of social identity to open up room for the exploration of alternatives. According to this study, as well as Simpson's (2005) look at adolescents' behavior in the virtual world, online, adolescents are able to step outside of their comfort zones and geographical locations in order to "enhance social life and create new forms of connection and social exchange" which is an important aspect in learning social competence (Simpson, 2005, p. 12). Simpson conducted his participant observation study by creating an avatar (a virtual representation of himself). Through this avatar, he communicated with other participants, noted how they interacted with each other, then compared these interactions with others observed in a real-world environment (2005).

Also looking at online communication within real-world social circles, a 2002 study of online communication use and expression of the "true self" online, a commonly held fear of rejection as a result of self-expression was discovered (Bargh, et al., 2002). Bargh et al. used three experiments to test participants' self-expression and comfort level by allowing them to communicate with strangers online and then in-person. The researchers found that the participants opened up more quickly when communicating online than in a face-to-face situation. Bargh, et. al argued that the fear of rejection held the participants back from discovering their true self, as this is achieved through candid and open communication, with both close friends and acquaintances. In order to retain social status, friendships and self-images, many teens reported behaving as they knew their friends expected them to, regardless of the truths behind those beliefs. This study showed that most teens wanted their friends and outsiders to see them as they saw themselves, and that they communicated more in line with their true selves through online

means because of the perceived anonymous quality it suggests, even when communicating with existing friends (Bargh, et al., 2002).

Similarly examining online friendship communication, a study by Leung (2006), which utilized a telephone survey of over 700 children and adolescents, connected online communication with existing friends to the reinforcement of feelings of value and worth, which lead to greater perceived social support and open communication of emotions. Other research has shown positive relationships between online communication and the high quality of existing real-world friendships, showing that among surveyed respondents aged 10 to 17 adolescents reported that friendships were enhanced by communicating with each other online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Communication online also may allow adolescents to present themselves in idealized ways that may not be acceptable for real-life friends, or to express themselves in ways deemed unacceptable by their social worlds, according to researchers Douglas (2001) and Maczewski (2002), who each conducted online interviews about this topic. Douglas found that online communication may enable an individual to act on behaviors or feelings that may be inhibited during face-to-face communication with friends or family members. As one respondent in an online interview conducted by Maczewski stated, “online, no one cares about your private life too much, just about the kind of person you are on the inside” (p. 13). However, Douglas found that the freedom to communicate away from face-to-face leads to more negative, hostile and socially unacceptable behaviors, as users may “lose a sense of their individual identity when they communicate anonymously via computer” and act on impulses that would be inhibited during face-to-face communication (p. 400).

Also considering concerns with online communication with friends, Harman, et al. (2005), using a questionnaire designed to collect adolescents' uses of online communication, asserts that the rise in interpersonal communication occurring online is "stifling a child's social skill development", as it restricts time spent socializing with peers in face-to-face situations (p. 3). Others researchers support this study, finding that more time spent communicating online equals less time spent with peers and friends in the real world, which may restrict the development of social competence and communication skills (Clark, et al., 2007; Mesch & Talmud, 2008). Adolescents who reported themselves as high users of online communication also indicated that they participated in fewer real world activities and had fewer close friends (Mesch & Talmud, 2006). Others claim that over-indulging in online communication may lead to anxiety, social phobias, dropping out of school and developing mental health issues (Harman, et al., 2005).

#### Research on Adolescents' Use of Social Networking Sites

In recent years, the term "online communication" has been split into multiple forms. Instant Messaging, blogs, message boards, email and social networking sites are just a few of the ways adolescents are able to engage in interpersonal communication on the Internet. As social networking sites gain popularity and media attention, more researchers have focused on these new sites, with nearly one hundred studies involving social networking sites having been conducted. Approximately ten to twenty discuss the adolescent population's use of this new phenomena (e.g. Gajjala, 2007; Lenhart, 2009; Magnuson & Dundes, 2008; Rapacki, 2007; Schouten, et al., 2006).

Adolescents' reasons and motivations of using social networking sites are similar to their uses of other online communication methods such as Instant Messaging. Social motivators such as friendship maintenance and friendship formation provide main reasons for teens to access these "virtual communities" of their peers (Simpson, 2005). As with other forms of online communication, both negative and positive results have been discovered when examining adolescent use of social networking sites (Harman, et. al, 2005; Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Perhaps one of the first studies to look into the virtual communities that set the stage for social networking sites as we know them today was the work of Talamo and Ligorio (2001) which looked at children's' and teens' uses of virtual communities and how friendships were formed through these sites. These researchers joined these communities in order to interact with the participants while they were being observed. Within these communities, users were visually anonymous, as they chose virtual characters to represent their physical beings. In this study, it was discovered that these friendships remained only in this virtual space, were based on a limited number of shared interests and did not expand to the real world environment (2001).

Also looking at online relationships among adolescents is Mesch and Talmud's 2006 study, which found that online-only friends had less in common, had less to talk about and fostered less trust and self-disclosure. However, with social networking sites, as was seen in Instant Messaging usage, adolescents today are communicating with friends they do interact with in their real lives (Thiel, 2003). Adolescents have taken their online friendships into their offline world, and have also transitioned their offline friends into their online social circles.

Feedback, as previously discussed, is an essential part of the adolescent's developmental process, as it allows for self-reflection and revision of personality characteristics that may be



deemed unsatisfactory by others (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Within social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook, feedback is available on a much larger scale. Some researchers have focused on this feedback aspect of social networking when examining these sites (e.g. Stern, 2004; Stritzke, et al., 2004; Valkenburg & Peter 2007). This type of “evaluative feedback” is a visible, countable and unavoidable (Stritzke, et al., 2004).

Adolescents have reported, by means of online surveys and interviews, that receiving positive feedback online provides validation of their identities and personalities, and influences their ideas of their own self-worth (Stern, 2004). Additionally, positive feedback about profile content confirmed the information they had placed on their profiles and added to the user’s positive self-image (Yurchisin, 2005). Negative comments or feedback have been shown to negatively affect an adolescent’s self esteem and perceived self-worth (Palfrey & Gasser 2008).

While social networking profiles can be seen as a physical representation of identity exploration and recreation, some researchers, such as Rapacki (2007), propose that adolescents’ identity formation has always worked this way, we just weren’t privy to it until now. Rapacki, who conducted a survey for parents of teens who have MySpace accounts states, “Identity, particularly for a young adult, can be a liquid concept, and the web can be the ideal means for navigating the waters of discovery” (p. 28). According to this study, parents of adolescents who utilize social networking sites for these types of identity experimentation purposes are concerned about the amount of this experimentation that is being done online (2007).

Another concern is the presentation of idealized selves, or the ways users wish they could be as opposed to how they are in reality (Harman, et al., 2005). The danger in presenting idealized, possible selves, according to several studies, are the affects of presenting alternate personas (Harman, et al., 2005; Rapacki, 2007). Alternate identities are particularly prevalent

among social networking sites with the ease of editing profile and picture content. The “Internet-affected social compensation hypothesis” proposed by Valkenburg and Peter (2005) asked if social networking profiles that differed from real-world identities positively or negatively affected the adolescent, however, the answer remains to be seen. Some researchers continue to question if the adolescents who create ideal or alternate identities on social networking profiles will begin to relate more to their online personas, and as a result cause them to be less socially competent (Valkenburg & Peter, 2005; Mesch & Talmud, 2008).

#### Research on Adolescent Females’ Use of Online Communication and Social Networking Sites

As previously stated, adolescent females are particularly vulnerable to identity confusion and experimentation, and have begun to use social networking sites to publicly conduct these experiments (Brumberg, 1997; Farmer, 2008). Several recent studies have examined adolescent females use of online communication with only five to ten studies specifically focusing on their use of social networking websites (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008; Stokes, 2007).

Thiel’s (2003) examination of adolescent females ages 10 to 15 sought to explore the ways they used online communication to “articulate” their identities to peers. Specifically, the study examined chatting online through Instant Messaging. Thiel received printouts from the participants’ online conversations with peers, and then asked follow-up questions about the conversations and topics that arose. The participants reported being able to express themselves more freely, and to experiment with different personality characteristics online, including conducting candid conversations with the opposite sex that may not have occurred in a face-to-face situation (2003).

Looking specifically at social networking websites, Stokes (2007) used a content analysis to examine web profiles of females aged 14 to 17 to explore how they are presenting themselves online, and what is influencing them to do so. Stokes discovered that each of these 27 females represented themselves in one of five ways, four of which were largely influenced by media such as television, movies and song lyrics. The fifth category, “resisters” seemed to be the exceptions. Their portrayals did not suggest media influences (2007). Females in this study also reported feeling as though they were better able to “play with identity and sexuality and to conquer any fears from their offline social lives” when communicating through MySpace in particular (Stokes, 2007).

### Uses and Gratifications Theory

The present study, applying uses and gratifications as a theoretical foundation, seeks to explore the uses of social networking websites by adolescent females (aged 14 to 17) and the gratifications obtained by this use. Uses and Gratifications theory is a prominent theory in the mass communication field, and has evolved and retained its flexibility throughout vast technological changes. Research involving this theory that began with newspapers and movies has now expanded to include cell phones, DVDs, e-mail and Internet use (Katz, et al., 1974; Ko, et al., 2005; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rubin & Windahl, 1986). Uses and gratifications theory holds that people purposefully use media for different reasons to obtain specific gratifications. In other words, people control their media and use specific media to satisfy their own various needs and wants (Katz, et al., 1974).

Developed in the 1940’s, uses and gratifications theory’s basic objectives were to identify the psychological needs that motivated users to seek out particular media in the first place, and

what needs were fulfilled as the subsequent result of this use. Katz, et al. strengthened and further defined uses and gratifications theory by defining its five basic assumptions (1974).

The first assumption holds that the audience is active in choosing their media (Rubin & Windahl, 1986). According to uses and gratifications, the audience is aware of their motivations for choosing particular media and are conscious of the gratifications they receive from such use (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). For example, if an individual wishes to seek out specific information, they may use the Internet as their medium of choice, as they know their needs will be fulfilled.

The second assumption holds that the audience is more powerful than the media, and that one's own opinions are stronger than media influences (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Despite pressures or manipulations present in the media, it is within an individual's self to resist those influences. The audience is in control over the media they use.

The third assumption proposes that users of media have a variety of needs, and in order to meet these needs, each individual may employ several sources that can potentially meet these goals (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). This may mean the utilization of numerous mass media sources or interpersonal communication sources. For example, an individual may choose to use the Internet to seek out information, but watch television for entertainment purposes. Different media types can fulfill distinctive needs or wants.

Fourth, the audience is aware of their needs and wants; their goals for using particular media are at the forefront of their media choices (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Individuals know what they are seeking, and thus are able to specifically choose their media based on these needs. This explains why much of the research using this theory has called for self-report data –

people know why they are using media, therefore they will be able to indicate the reasons for this use and the goals that have been met by it.

Last, the value of the media being consumed can only be determined by the audience member who has selected this media (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Importance placed on media varies by user and type of media; these value statements cannot be generalized to others beyond the individual choosing their own media.

As uses and gratifications expanded as a theory, it became less widely generalizable, as results identified specific audiences' uses of specific media (Ruggiero, 2000). As early as the 1940's, "meaningful categories" were created to organize the diverse motivations and gratifications sought from media use. Based on individual self-report data, Katz, et al. (1974) identified 35 needs and motivations of media use. These original 35 were then classified into five main categories: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension release needs.

### Application of Uses and Gratifications Theory to the Internet

As media has transformed to include more interactivity, particularly looking at Internet use, more categories involving social integrative needs have been added to uses and gratifications theory, including: social escapism (passing time online rather than in real life), interactive control (controlling content specific content on the Internet), social interaction, social status and social inclusion (being recognized as popular and desirable online), all which exemplify the current emphasis on media as a communication tool (Ko, et al., 2005; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2006; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Maintaining and developing personal relationships, another communication aspect of media use, has also inspired several new

categories, including connectedness (being available to friends online at all times), relationship maintenance (keeping in touch and up to date with friends), making new friends, keeping in touch with friends and companionship (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Additional motivations in regards to identity issues (identity exploration, identity development) also aid in illustrating the social and communicative characteristics of new media developments (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

As the Internet has become a media tool that can be transformed into virtually anything a user wants or needs, more and more researchers have studied it from a uses and gratifications perspective (e.g. Ko, et al., 2005; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Ruggiero, 2000; Sun, et al., 2008). Exploring the Internet as an interpersonal communication tool using survey research, LaRose and Eastin (2004) discovered that online communication provided some users with the ability to elevate or maintain their social status while talking to friends online, an important incentive of Internet use among college students. Other social integrative needs such as “problem solving, persuading others, and status seeking” were among the most important motivators of communicating online (LaRose & Eastin, 2004, p. 359). Also using college students, a recent survey looking specifically at social networking website communication found that 57% of MySpace and Facebook users utilized the sites for posting pictures, inviting people to social functions or to learn about events and other social functions, all of which serve a social status need or motivation (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 171).

Interestingly, the need for social status or elevation seems to start much earlier than college. Leung’s 2006 study, which looked at online communication among children and teens aged 8 to 18, found that within the broad “social compensation” motive discovered among this age group were the specific motivations of social maintenance and social recognition, or keeping

up to date with existing friends and being viewed as someone with many friends and acquaintances (Leung, 2006, p. 5).

Relationship maintenance or development is a motivation that also seems to cross age group lines. With the increased prevalence of social networking and dating websites, “meeting people” has become a commonly stated motivation and gratification sought/received for using such sites (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p. 180). Relationship maintenance, more than forming new relationships, was cited as a motivator for online communication among children, teens and college students alike. A 2007 survey (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2007) found that 96% of college students stated they used social networking sites and online communication “to keep in touch with old friends” and 91% used this communication to stay connected with “current friends”; 54% used it to seek out new friends (p. 171). Among children and adolescents, “relationship maintenance” was rated more highly than “making new friends” as a motivator for Internet use (Leung, 2006, p. 17).

Another recent study (LaRose & Eastin, 2004) looking at uses and gratifications of the Internet identified a major category of motivations as “self-reflexive motivations”, or learning about oneself by communicating with others online (p. 360). LaRose and Eastin concluded that the use of the Internet is “perhaps a ... means of constantly exploring and trying out new, improved versions of our selves” (p. 373).

The several current studies involving uses and gratifications and social networking websites have employed college students as samples, likely due to access and convenience (Clark, et al., 2007; Ellison, et al., 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Zhao, et al., 2008). While college student respondents provide a picture of their uses and gratifications of social networking sites, it is important that further studies examine other various age groups. Scholars

have acknowledged the need for more research using participants under age 18, as investigation of this group has been limited due to logistical challenges (Sun, et al., 2008). While the adolescent population has been examined to some extent with respect to using uses and gratifications, the application of this theory to adolescents' uses and gratifications of social networking websites remains largely unexplored.

Based on previous research concerning adolescent use of online communication, and social networking websites in particular, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1:** How do adolescent females, aged 14-17, use social networking websites for communication purposes?

**RQ2:** How do adolescent females, aged 14-17, use social networking websites for self-presentation and identity exploration?



### CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Due to the exploratory nature of the present study, and the limited literature regarding meanings associated with the use of social networking websites among adolescent females, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for investigating the previously stated research questions. A series of interviews were conducted in order to allow participants, females ages 14 to 17 who are social networking website users, to openly describe their experiences, perceptions and uses of social networking websites in their own words and descriptions.

As the primary data collection method, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of participants' individual experiences with and attitudes towards social networking websites. Interviews assisted the researcher in discovering the meanings attached to social networking sites among the adolescent female population. Adolescent participants were able to provide the researcher with a first-hand account of their experiences, serving as "the observer's observer" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 174). Additionally, a brief questionnaire developed to gather demographic information (e.g. age, grade level) and social networking usage was administered to participants at the beginning of each interview (see Appendix A). The questionnaire also served to prepare participants for topics that were to be discussed during the in-depth interview.

It should be noted that while this study concerns online usage behaviors, it was determined that in-person interviews would be more appropriate than conducting online interviews for two main reasons. First, in face-to-face situations, the researcher has the opportunity to encourage participants to respond and make can them feel more comfortable about their role in the study. Second, the literature review revealed few related previous studies involving in-person interview data among this age group, as the majority of related investigations

have been conducted via the Internet. This situation provides the present study with the opportunity to make a unique methodological contribution to the literature.

### Sample

The number of participants planned for the present study was 16 to 20 adolescent females, ranging in age from 14 to 17 who report logging into at least one social networking website at least once per day. For the purposes of this study, an adolescent is defined as an individual who has gone through puberty, but has not yet reached full maturity. While an individual may be considered an adolescent as early as age 10 and as late as age 18, participants ranging in age from 14 to 17 were recruited for the present study, due to opportunity and convenience.

A convenience sample of adolescent females who are regular social networking website users and attend a small private high school in Central Florida, a pool of approximately 40 female students, was used as the sample population. No gatekeeper was needed in this situation, as the researcher is employed by this facility. Written permission to recruit volunteer student participants for the present research project was obtained from the executive director of this private school.

### Recruitment

During a weekday prior to the lunch hour, all female students were gathered into a common room and given a verbal description of the study and what their role would be should they choose to participate. Time was allowed for any questions the students had. Interested students were then given UCF IRB-approved consent forms to take home for their parent/guardian to read and sign, as well as UCF IRB-approved assent forms for the students to

read and sign themselves (see Appendix B for Consent Forms, Appendix C for Assent Forms). Students were reminded that there was no penalty if they chose not to participate and that involvement in the study was completely voluntary and only benefited the researcher. To reduce any undue influence, all teachers and the executive director were absent from this discussion.

Students were given a deadline of one week to return their consent and assent forms if they wished to participate in the study. The consent forms outlined the research being conducted, the associated risks, the child's role in the research, the time commitment necessary to participate and the researcher's contact information. Assent forms also described the research project, the child's role in the research and the time commitments involved. According to the Institutional Review Board, an individual is defined as a "child" if under the age of 18, thus requiring the permission of a parent or guardian to participate in any research studies.

Eighteen total students returned their consent and assent forms. These students were then given a short questionnaire to take home and return to gather information on their social networking usage and other demographic information. Those who reported logging in to one social networking website at least once per day were placed into either the focus group or scheduled for an in-depth interview, depending on convenience and the students' and parents' schedule. While all students reported logging in at least once per day, two students' schedules were not accommodating for participation, thus leaving a pool of sixteen total participants. This sample size was to account for a focus group of 6 to 8 participants and 10 to 12 individual in-depth interview participants.

The interview guide, consent forms and research procedures were approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D for approval letter from UCF's Institutional Review Board). Additionally, the researcher has undergone IRB

Human Research ethics training provided by the university (see Appendix G for approval letter from UCF's Institutional Review Board).

### Research Instrument Development

After reviewing previous relevant literature concerning adolescent online communication and social networking website usage, the researcher identified key issues and topics pertinent to the present study. Once these issues were noted, an Interview Guide was created to address these topic areas (see Appendix E for Interview Guide). The Interview Guide followed a semi-structured format, which outlined questions to be asked, but was flexible enough to account for responses from participants which may cause topics to be addressed out of order. The questions were prewritten but allowed for deviations depending on conversational flow (Berg, 2007). Consistent with a qualitative research design, the questions were open-ended to permit participants to answer in their own words and describe their own personal experiences and opinions. Probing questions were also asked as needed to elicit more specific and detailed responses (2007).

The Interview Guide covered the following topics: particular uses of social networking sites (i.e. to talk with friends, to make new friends, to update personal profile pages), the characteristics of communicating through social networking sites versus face-to-face situations, making friends through social networking sites compared to face-to-face, identity presentations on social networking sites compared to real life and the influence of feedback on social networking websites on self and others.

Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews, one focus group was conducted. This focus group served two purposes. First, it allowed the researcher to pretest the Interview Guide

questions, observing how questions were received by the participants. This aided the researcher in determining whether any of the questions should have been reworded, revised or removed. Second, the candid conversations that arose among participants during the focus group generated new topics and themes (i.e. forming friendships through social networking sites and expressing creativity through social networking sites) that were then integrated into the Interview Guide prior to the in-depth interviews.

### Procedure

Following a qualitative approach, the researcher acted as the main research instrument for the present study. The researcher conducted the pretest focus group and in-depth interviews, asked questions per the Interview Guide; listened to and observed the participants as they responded to questions and probes; and recorded, gathered and analyzed all of the data. The researcher interpreted the data and presented all findings.

#### Pretest Focus Group

The pretest focus group lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in the library of a small private high school located in the Central Florida region. This focus group occurred during a weekday. Parents were asked to pick up their students later due to their participation. Pizza was ordered for all participants and they were told that they may eat and relax for about 20 minutes before beginning the focus group. After everyone had eaten, the participants were guided into the library of the private school and asked to take a seat around a large conference table. The participants were then asked to write their first names, or a pseudonym, on a name card placed at their seat. A key that matches pseudonyms with real names is kept in a computer file to which only the researcher has access. The focus group began with a short introduction by

the researcher, serving as moderator, who explained the study's purpose and the participants' role in this study. The researcher also explained focus group procedures and why focus groups were important to the present study.

The participants were informed that the focus group was being audio-recorded in its entirety, and that their responses are to remain confidential. Although the researcher ensured confidentiality, the participants were also informed that in any focus group there is a risk of confidentiality being breached simply because other participants may discuss the focus group outside of this setting.

Once the participants were given this basic introduction, they were then asked to introduce themselves by stating their first name (or pseudonym), age and which social networking websites they use. While all the participants knew each other, they were told that these introductions were primarily so that the researcher would be able to identify speakers when listening to the tape recording. The researcher then used the carefully developed Interview Guide to assist in gaining participant responses to questions concerning their experiences and uses of social networking sites. The findings from the focus group were analyzed and used to help further refine the Interview Guide prior to the start of the in-depth interviews.

#### In-depth Interview Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a classroom at the private high school in the Central Florida region or in the student's home, as agreed upon by the researcher, participant and her parent/guardian. All participants were provided lunch, dinner or a snack by the researcher. Each interview participant was given a verbal explanation of the present study and their role in the research. The researcher then informed the participant that her interview was being audio-

recorded and that their responses were to remain confidential. The participant was first asked to complete the short questionnaire to gather demographic information and social networking website usage. The researcher then conducted the interview using the Interview Guide.

As an employee at the research setting, the researcher had previously developed relationships with the students in the sample population and their parents. While the researcher is not involved directly in the education of the students at this facility, all parent and student communications are directed by her, allowing for familiarity and confidence from parents in regards to the present study and the interactions between students and the researcher. This made the recruitment process much easier and faster, as parents and guardians were quick to give consent and willing to allow their students to stay after school to give interviews, or welcome the researcher into their homes in the evenings and weekends to conduct interviews.

These previously established relationships let the students to feel more comfortable and at ease during the in-depth interviews with the researcher, leading to more candid and honest responses. The participants of the pretest focus group have also developed relationships with each other, as they all attend the same small school on a daily basis. This was expected to encourage candid conversations among the participants, as they were familiar and comfortable with each other.

The participants did not seem hesitant to reveal any information in the presence of their peers. Additionally, previous interactions with the researcher did not seem to inhibit their responses in the in-depth interviews. Since this age group (under the age of 18) is often difficult to access, this situation was a unique opportunity for the researcher to obtain permissions from both the students and parents due to the relationships established.

### Data Analysis

The pretest focus group and all in-depth interviews were audio-recorded in full. The researcher listened to the audiotapes carefully and transcribed each in its entirety. The researcher also reviewed and analyzed field notes from observations during the interviews (i.e. nonverbal cues).

Data coding and analysis involved several stages. The first phase consisted of open coding, in which all transcripts were read thoroughly and carefully, notes being made concerning participant responses while keeping each research question at the forefront of the analysis. The researcher labeled and identified categories of responses. After these initial reads, fifteen categories identifying motivations for using social networking sites were apparent, due to common responses from participants. As the present study draws on uses and gratifications theory, the identified categories reflected the motivations for using social networking websites as reported by the participants.

These fifteen categories were then reduced by combining those with similar content or common ideas, emerging with a more limited number of identified motivations for using social networking sites. In the final phase, individual statements from transcripts were analyzed and placed into each of the afore identified categories, providing detailed examples of the motivations through direct quotes from the participants. From the original fifteen, five categories were identified: Information Sharing, Convenient Communication, Self-Expression, Friendship Formation and Social Support.

Throughout this process, the field notes taken during interviews were analyzed by the researcher while she concurrently read through each transcript in order to provide a more thorough and enriching view of the data. Notes concerning participants' body language, eye



contact or facial expressions were especially helpful in interpreting some of the participants' responses. This gave further insight to the data and assisted in a deeper understanding of the participants' motivations for using social networking sites.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore adolescent females' uses of social networking websites and the meanings they attach to this behavior, in particular, for communication and self-presentation purposes. A series of ten in-depth interviews and one focus group were conducted. The total number of participants was 15, with ten interview participants and five focus group participants (see Appendix H for complete Participant Profile Chart). Most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, the shortest being 20 minutes. The focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Results from the preliminary questionnaire indicated that all participants logged into one social networking website at least once a day, with more than half (53.3%) reporting logging in more than twice per day. Of the 15 participants, 73.3% (n=11) identified Facebook as their favorite social networking site, with 66.6% (n= 10) reporting that their main reason for logging in is to communicate with friends. Six participants (40%) have held social networking accounts for more than three years, while 60% (n=9) have been using social networking sites for two years or less.

As previously stated, after the coding and analysis process, five categories of motivations for using social networking sites were identified: 1) Information Sharing, 2) Convenient Communication, 3) Self-Expression, 4) Friendship Formation and 5) Social Support. Additional subcategories also developed. These five categories are each discussed in turn and are supported by verbatim excerpts from the interview data. The following categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but are rather interrelated concepts.

### Information Sharing

The first common theme apparent in the data was the continuous exchange of information between users of social networking sites. Several types of information sharing were mentioned by the participants: Practical/Academic (e.g. letting classmates know about school assignments), Personal (e.g. updates about the user's personal life, shared with other users) and Social (e.g. updates that are received from other users, about other users).

#### Practical/Academic

Practical or academic information sharing emerged as a response from participants when asked about adding classmates to their friends list. While many admitted that they might not be friends with these individuals in real life, or talk to them when physically in class together, they would often add classmates as "friends" online in case they missed class and needed to make up the work, or had questions about homework or other assignments that were given. Participants stated that this type of information exchange might take place through comments on a classmate's profile page or through the instant message-type "chat" feature available on Facebook.

Said participant Blythe, "When I need, like, homework and things and I don't have any friends in my classes it's really useful" (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Kelly agreed, pointing out that since a classmate may not necessarily be a friend in real life, having them on your "friends list" on Facebook or MySpace may be the only way you have of contacting them if you need help or are confused about an assignment. One participant, Lyndsey, reported that this type of communication was straight to the point, more so just an exchange of information rather than a candid conversation (Lyndsey, 16, Facebook user). Blythe agreed, stating "I think it's

more if you just needed homework...I mean, I don't talk to them" (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user).

## Personal

Personal Information Sharing, or letting friends on social networking sites know of updates, news or other personal information about oneself, can occur in several ways. As Valerie reported, her main use of Facebook is to "inform friends of my life" (Valerie, 15, Facebook user). One participant mentioned that one quick method of spreading the word about an update in her life was to post a Facebook status about the news or event. A Facebook status is a couple of sentences or a paragraph that a user writes and updates that appears on all their Facebook friends' home pages. The user's friends then have the option to comment on the update, but even if they don't comment, the update is available for all to see. Participants cited that updating their statuses as the fastest way to let everyone know about personal news at once. Hope said:

I mean, if you have to talk to everybody or you want to ask everybody a question, or if you're excited about something and you want everybody to know, you can just put it in your status and then everybody will know and they can comment (Hope, 17, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user).

As Hope reported, this information is transmitted to *everyone* on her friends list, but this does not stop her from putting private information, such as details concerning fights with friends or boyfriends, on her status. Other updates, such as exciting news like getting into college, are also posted on statuses. While most participants mentioned partaking in this type of information sharing in some way, Alexandra observed, "I think people post way too much information on their statuses. Like, all this personal stuff" (Alexandra, 15, Facebook user).

An additional way that users share their personal information with others is by editing their profile content. One example of this, mentioned by several participants, is changing the “relationship status” information on their profile. Amy said, “I would say the only time my profile ever changes is if I get in a new relationship or something and it’s kind of like you’re letting people know so the guys aren’t flirting with you anymore” (Amy, 17, MySpace user). The participants used their profile information to let others know of changes in their lives without actually telling them, assuming that friends will take note of the updates.

### Social

Social Information Sharing can take several forms. The first is receiving updates from other friends through either their statuses or bulletins (MySpace’s version of status updates), or more direct ways of communicating, such as comments on others’ profile pages or talking to each other through the chat feature. While direct communication of information does occur, the participants more often mentioned learning about friends’ lives through more passive ways of communication, such as reading others’ status updates.

Status updates from friends that appear on the user’s home page seems to be the easiest way of keeping up to date with others’ lives, according to the participants. As Jessica said, “I use it [Facebook] to see what friends have updated and what they’re doing. Like, especially ones I can’t see during school. I like to see what they’re doing” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Erica agreed, stating, “I check the News Feed [home page] to see what’s going on. What is everybody doing, is everyone in a good mood” (Erica, 17, Facebook user). Autumn felt that learning about others’ updates is the main use of social networking sites, “It’s what Facebook seems to be about, about friends and what your friends are doing” (Autumn, 17, MySpace user).

“It’s like going through a newspaper”, Erica said. “You can see all the little stories that are going on and what everybody’s doing” (Erica, 17, Facebook user).

Updates concerning others’ romantic situations were also cited by the participants as memorable when learning about their friends’ lives through social networking sites. Basically, “It’s a good way of finding out if people break up” (Erica, 17, Facebook user). Other participants agreed that relationship status changes in particular stood out to them: “Oh, the breakups and makeups online can happen in thirty minutes. Someone is single and then twenty minutes later they’re going back out” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). During one interview, a participant mentioned that she had “just found out” one of her friends had started dating someone through a relationship status change on Facebook (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). When asked if the participants would have found out this information if it wasn’t online, most said they would, but much later. As Erica said, “Eventually, but not immediately” (Erica, 17, Facebook user).

The participants mentioned that their friends were quick to post information on their profiles, but at times neglect to actually tell friends the news in person. Alexandra said, “There’s a lot of things going on with friends that I didn’t know...that they don’t really say here [in person] but they do on there [Facebook]”. She recounts a recent example:

My friend was dating somebody and...they were dating like two or three years and then all of a sudden, in the middle of the year, they broke up and she didn’t say anything at school but she had posted it online. Like, a really raging comment, and that’s how I found out about it (Alexandra, 15, Facebook user).

The participants, and at least the friends they mentioned, seemed to be more comfortable providing this information through their profile content or status updates than with sharing it in person.

Gossip through social networking sites is another way participants mentioned getting information about others. Participants noted that couples or friends fighting with one another would post the information about the fight on their statuses or bulletins. Blythe gives an example, “They [other users] always have so much drama too, especially on MySpace...They’re always like ‘my best friend did this’ or ‘my boyfriend cheated on me’. Stupid things like that...They love to spread rumors” (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). While the participants took note of such instances, they felt users did this for attention, and did not condone the behavior.

Several participants also mentioned times when finding out information about others’ lives through a social networking site was a negative experience. Georgina recalled the experience of learning through a status update that her friend had been killed. “That was something I remember”, Georgina said, “seeing the status update my friend had written about it”. When asked how it felt to find out this news online, Georgina had said, “It was bad finding out that way. Through Facebook. Like, it was nine hours after it happened and I was just finding out in that way. That definitely stood out as a shocking thing to see” (Georgina, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). Valerie also had a recent experience to share. She said:

Yesterday I found out that my confirmation godfather’s good friend had a son on Sunday and he died on Tuesday because he was 16 weeks premature and I was really struck by that...I messaged him and said to give my condolences, even though I don’t really know him (Valerie, 15, Facebook user).

When asked if she would have known this information if it weren’t for Facebook, Valerie said she would have eventually found out, but much later on. It is not just gossip and relationship status updates that are shared through social networking sites, but vital information as well.

### Convenient Communication

The second common theme found in the data was that of Convenient Communication, or being able to communicate with “friends” at the users’ own ease and convenience. Several categories of Convenient Communication developed, each describing a way the participants used social networking sites to their advantage when communicating with friends.

#### Keeping In Touch

The most commonly cited way the participants engaged in Convenient Communication was keeping in touch with both friends and family that had left the immediate area, or could not be seen physically on a regular basis. Blythe explained, “I find a lot of my older friends [on Facebook] that I’ve lost touch with for many years, so it’s kind of neat to see what’s up with them now” (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Georgina agreed, stating that she primarily communicates through Facebook “to keep in touch with friends, especially the ones that live out of state” (Georgina, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). Another participant added that social networking sites help her keep in touch with family members when it wasn’t possible or practical to see them or speak to them on the phone. Autumn says:

I have a cousin who’s in Iraq right now and he emails me through MySpace. So that’s really memorable. I haven’t heard from him in about three months now, but when he does email me, it is a really memorable moment (Autumn, 17, MySpace user).

In situations such as Autumn’s, social networking sites are one of the only modes of communication available to keep in touch with those out of reach.



## Multitasking

Additionally, participants noted that it is much easier to communicate with more friends at once via social networking sites than it is with other modes of communication, such as in-person or on the phone. The participants were also able to perform other tasks while they were speaking with multiple friends at once, such as completing homework or watching TV. The ease of being able to talk to multiple friends at once in this way was given as a motivation for the participants to engage in conversations through social networking sites as opposed to communicating in other ways. Erin elaborated:

There's a difference between talking to your best friend on the phone and talking to a bunch of friends on Facebook, and it's easier to talk to a bunch of friends online than it is to talk to one person on the phone (Erin, 17, Facebook user).

Like Erin, other participants reported that it was much easier to multitask and carry on multiple conversations through comments, messages or the chat feature than to talk to each person on the phone or in person. "I can't talk to everyone on the phone", Aubrey says, "so it's nice to be able to talk to multiple people at once" (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

In addition to multitasking their communication, the participants were also able to complete other tasks while still talking to their friends through Facebook or MySpace. For example, Erica says, "I don't like phone conversations because I can't concentrate on other things while I'm on the phone. So when you go on Facebook it's easier to talk to people through chat" (Erica, 17, Facebook user).

## Self-Expression

Self-Expression as a theme was a combination of several topics that arose during the interviews. While the participants are all very different from each other, it was observed that each used their social networking site of choice in some way to express themselves to those on their friends list, many times in ways they were unable to articulate or convey in person. After analyzing the responses, it was determined that the participants used social networking sites to express themselves in two ways: Verbally and/or Artistically.

### Verbally

“Verbal” self-expression refers to having conversations with friends through social networking sites. While users aren’t truly able to speak verbally through these websites, communicating through comments, messages or the chat feature found on both Facebook and MySpace is equivalent to speaking to someone in person in this context. For some, it is easier to speak their minds openly and honestly through these sites as opposed to speaking in face-to-face situations, helping them to overcome shyness and social barriers. “Talking to them on Facebook is easier”, Blythe said. “I’m a really shy person. And quiet” (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Carmen reported that she knows a few people who don’t open up in person, but online they initiate conversations and speak candidly. She explains that, “in life they’re too shy, but there’s no shyness online” (Carmen, 16, Facebook and MySpace user).

This ability to speak their minds online also has negative outcomes, as several of the participants mentioned becoming meaner while talking to friends through social networking sites, at least meaner than they would be in person. Georgina said that on Facebook, “I might say what I really think. I might be a little bit nastier” (Georgina, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

Of those participants who admitted to saying things online that they would never say in person, they freely admitted that they would never say those comments to a person's face. The participants also remarked that while they could be "nastier" online, friends and acquaintances in turn could be nastier to them, saying things they would never say in person.

The participants also accounted for the disparity between communication in person and through social networking sites, providing several reasons for this distinction. The first was the lack of physical and verbal cues present through social networking sites, allowing them to speak their minds without the consequence of a physical facial reaction or verbal tone of voice. Valerie explained, "Sometimes you can't really say things to people to their faces, like even if it's not bad. Like, you'd rather just say it to the computer screen so you won't have to see their facial expressions if it's a bad thing or something". Even phone conversations could be difficult for the participants because "when you're on the phone you can hear the change of tone in their voice" (Valerie, 15, Facebook user). Jessica agreed, saying that the impact of a person's facial expression or tone of voice could make it more difficult to be truthful or open in person (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Through social networking sites, the participants are able to speak openly and candidly, for better or worse, "without having to worry about their reactions as much". Erin also said that without the physical and verbal cues, she is able to open up and "say what I wouldn't say in person" (Erin, 17, Facebook user).

Another reason for the ease of verbal expression online was the "pause" time given before responses. When communicating in person, responses are given immediately, without time to think about the consequences of a reaction or how to properly word a reply. Through social networking sites, there is an unlimited time with which to form your reply, ensuring it is worded in just the right way, as opposed to having "to spontaneously talk" (Erin, 17, Facebook

user). Erica agreed, saying, “I can think about what I’m going to say [on Facebook]. Normally when I’m on the phone it takes me a while and I’m silent. It’s easier somehow for me” (Erica, 17, Facebook user). For Lyndsey, on social networking sites, “it’s acceptable to have a longer response time” (Lyndsey, 17, Facebook user). Carmen also explained what the pause time means for her:

I like talking online because then you have more time to think about what you want to say. I mean, not really through IM, but through comments and stuff. You can be wittier and you don’t mess up as much (Carmen, 16, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user).

This lag time allows a moment to ensure the response is appropriate and in some cases, funny. Also mentioning humor, “I have some friends that are really funny online, but that’s because they have time to think about what they’re going to say” (Kelly, 16, Facebook user). This time between responses caused many participants to feel their ideas were being communicated more deliberately and clearly, and with more humor or intelligence than if they were having a candid conversation in a face-to-face situation.

Also, according to the participants, the lag time between responses can cause arguments or fights to become blown out of proportion and to drag out for days. Aubrey elaborated, “If you’re talking to someone on Facebook...you can, like, pause for a while before you think of what to say, which is why I’m against fighting or whatever via chat because you can stop and think or like, ask someone else” (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). She further explained that the pause time, as well as the lack of verbal cues, can even create arguments or discrepancies:

...the big thing about talking over Facebook or through chat is the tone of voice, so you can't tell when someone's joking or serious and since it's online, and you have an unlimited time to reply, things don't usually die out as fast. Like, conversations and jokes last longer. So, if someone gets ticked off, it just, like, goes on and on, like throughout the day or days (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

Whereas in real-time conversations exchanges are made instantaneously, through social networking sites the lapse time between replies, the lack of verbal and physical cues and the misinterpretation of sarcasm can increase misunderstandings and create arguments.

Alternatively, one participant cited that the pause time helps her to avoid arguments. Erica said, "online you can sit there and think and say 'Well how can I phrase this so that they get what I'm saying, but they've just pissed me off but I don't want to say something that's insulting or negative'. And then you can type it out" (Erica, 17, Facebook user).

### Artistically

Several participants discussed the idea of using their social networking profiles as a way to either express their own artistic abilities or to use art and pictures to express their feelings or mood. Most used this type of expression in place of writing an "About Me", a one or two paragraph description of yourself that appears on your social networking profile. Hope discussed altering the layout on her MySpace as a way of conveying her feelings:

I'll change the background and I have all these pictures in my Photo Bucket with all these pictures that I like, so I'll just keep them in my interests [section] and everything in, like, my About Me. Whatever I like at the day (Hope, 17, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and Tumblr user).

Rather than textually depicting herself in her About Me, Hope chooses to instead display pictures to describe herself. Blythe also used pictures to illustrate her mood through her MySpace. She said:

[On] MySpace I might do a theme one day, depending on what my picture is. I had one picture and I had Photoshopped it that had this really cool light thing so I looked for light pictures and made a really big background about it (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user).

Some participants mentioned that previously, in middle school, they would use text to extensively describe themselves, but they had “gotten over it”, and now “just kind of put pictures” (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user ; Hope, 17, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and Tumblr user).

Participants also cited using their social networking profiles to display their own artistic talents for their friends to view and comment. Autumn said, “my About Me is a ... free verse poem. ‘Cause I’m a writer, it’s just what I am, so it is about me. It’s about me in a poem and I write poetry and stories so it is who I am” (Autumn, 17, MySpace user). While all the participants’ friends have access to this self-expression, most state that they mainly post this type of art for themselves, as an outlet. Jessica described, “I have fun on my MySpace. Decorating it, writing stuff that nobody cares to read but I still write it anyway” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). While they know others will see their writings or photos, they say that this is not their motivation for posting.

### Friendship Formation

For the participants in this study, friendship formation in this instance does not mean meeting people online or actively seeking out potential friends through a search on a social networking site. Rather, communicating through social networking sites, or even simply adding

someone to a friends list, serves as an icebreaker to getting to know peers better than they would have in real life. Adding someone as a friend through a social networking site allows the users to find out further information about each other that may have not arisen during time spent together in class, for example. Also, adding each other as friends on a social networking site at times serves as an introduction between “friends”. Once added, the friends now feel more comfortable talking and interacting with each other in their real lives.

Blythe said that adding people on social networking sites before talking to them in person cuts down on the “awkwardness” of an initial conversation. She continued:

I find it hard to just approach someone randomly and be like ‘hey what’s up?’. If you don’t really know them then you don’t really know what to do. Like, what if they don’t think it’s cool that you’re just randomly approaching them? (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user).

Jessica agreed with Blythe, saying she’d rather start talking to someone through Facebook or MySpace because “then you don’t have that initial awkward face-to-face trying to start a conversation...and you don’t really know what to say next” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Blythe said that approaching someone through Facebook or MySpace eliminates this initial awkwardness because accepting someone as a friend online makes them more receptive to talking to you in person. Carmen also addressed this possible awkwardness when discussing the transition from social networking sites to real life, “It’s, like, hard to talk to them [online friends]. You don’t know if they actually want to talk to you. It’s like two different worlds...There’s the Internet world where you can talk about anything and real life where you don’t know if you’re actually important to them” (Carmen, 16, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user).

Adding someone as a friend online before talking to them in person also allows the users to discover commonalities between them, making for an icebreaker when transitioning to in-person communication. Blythe elaborated:

You find out more similarities [through social networking sites] and then it's easier to talk to them in real life because you found out something you both like and it's a good way to get information without being a creep...Once you find out something about someone, it's just so much easier (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user).

Having knowledge of similarities prior to talking to a new friend makes the transition from online to in-person smoother, as there is already a built-in topic of conversation that each person can approach. When asked if the participants would add someone from their classes that they had never spoken to in real life, nearly all of them said they would. They went on to say that they would probably talk to the person in class after they had added them online. "I'll add people and then grow to know them", Carmen explained (Carmen, 16, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user). Aubrey agreed, stating she would add them because "maybe we'll be friends in the future" (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

Additionally, some participants mentioned adding people they desired a friendship with as a way of making more friends. They said that by adding them as a friend online, they essentially became friends in real life, and were then able to talk to the person face-to-face. As Aubrey said:

If you saw someone at school that you thought was cool, you could just request them and start talking to them on Facebook and then from there your friendship would grow. So, it does expand your social circle" (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

The participants *are* making friends through their social networking site usage, but the friends are people they already know in some capacity in their real lives. As Valerie explained, "it's like,



‘oh I don’t really know you, but you’re in my Music Theory class. I’ll talk to you someday...like a starting off point I guess you could say’ (Valerie, 15, Facebook user). All the participants said they do not add people they don’t know to their friends’ lists, and count those they have seen around school or who are mutual friends as people they “know”. Adding friends through social networking sites seems to be serving as a bridge from acquaintance to friend. While a person may start out as a near stranger, the participants seemed to be saying that by adding them to Facebook, for example, a user would be able to discover commonalities and initiate conversations, building a solid foundation for a friendship.

### Social Support

The final motivation for using social networking sites for the participants in this study appears to be the utilization of these sites as sources of social support and validation. The participants often mentioned posting status updates, pictures or other materials on their profiles in order to receive positive comments from friends in response to these updates. These comments served as visible support from friends and family members, and were regarded as uplifting and encouraging by participants.

Positive comments on pictures, status updates and profile content in general were seen to positively affect the participants’ moods in real life. When asked how they felt about getting positive comments, all the participants seemed to visibly perk up, as if remembering comments received in the past. Valerie said that the first thing she does upon logging into Facebook is to “see if anyone has commented or liked my statuses. That makes me feel a little bit special if my friends have liked something”, and further explained that positive comments “make me feel so amazing!” (Valerie, 15, Facebook user). Other participants agreed, saying that positive

comments or feedback on statuses makes them feel, “Happy! Like, they like me” and that they “make me feel better!” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user; Erin, 17, Facebook user). Georgina also takes note of positive comments, stating that “they make everybody feel good” (Georgina, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

Participants seemed to deem these positive comments as a visible way of receiving social support from their friends. Kelly explained, “It makes me feel good that I have people that support me, ‘cause even if you know that they’re supporting you it makes you feel better that you know they’re actually expressing it” (Kelly, 16, Facebook user). This social support also serves as a positive boost, as Carmen explained, “If I’m having a really bad day...then your friends can be like ‘oh why’ or ‘I’m sorry’ and that makes you feel a lot better ‘cause it’s like they care” (Carmen, 16, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user). Similar sentiments were expressed by Autumn: “If you’re having a mini-freak out and think you’re not getting into college, everyone can comment and say ‘No, it’s ok’...Everyone can comfort you” (Autumn, 17, MySpace user). The participants admitted to posting status updates or other comments in order to receive this support, and help them feel better about a problem, issue or all around bad day.

By posting pictures of themselves, the participants also seem to be seeking out validation and support of their physical appearances. Participants reported that receiving positive comments on a photo of themselves also enhanced their mood and validated their appearance in that particular picture. When asked if receiving a positive comment on a picture would affect their clothing choices or hairstyles, nearly all said it would. The participants reported that they would wear that particular outfit or hairstyle more as a result of the positive comment, at least “more than usual” (Georgina, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). Blythe said, “I’d probably wear it [an outfit] more” (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Danielle reported that she “probably

would” wear a shirt more often that had gotten positive comments on Facebook because “it’s kind of like saying it looks good on me. So I’d be like ‘oh ok, if it looks on me then I’ll wear it again” (Danielle, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). Participants also mentioned that positive comments confirmed their taste in clothing, and gave them more self-confidence. As Aubrey said, “I love when people are like ‘oh you’re so pretty’. It just makes me feel really good about myself...It’s always nice to get a little ego boost” (Aubrey, 15, Facebook and MySpace user).

Alternatively, negative comments seem to have the reverse affect on participants’ moods and self-assuredness. While most participants stated that they would simply brush off a negative comment received through a social networking site, when asked if a negative comment would stop them from wearing an outfit again, most said it would. “I’d think about it a lot more”, said Blythe (Blythe, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). This was a common response among participants.

While the participants said negativity online did not affect their feelings, and that these types of comments would be more hurtful in person, they then stated that they would second guess their clothing choices, hairstyle or other aspects of their personalities that had received the harmful comments. Erin said, “I might wear it once more and see what other people think, if it gets me wondering” (Erin, 17, Facebook user). When asked about positive comments, the participants had perked up; negative comments had caused them to lower their eyes, shrug or drop their voices, again as if remembering a comment they had received.

When asked about how they would handle a negative comment appearing on their profile pages or a picture, most participants stated they would delete the comment first and foremost. Jessica says, “I’d probably delete it...Like, what if other people think that kind of thing?” (Jessica, 16, Facebook and MySpace user). Erica says, “I would delete the comment. Because I

don't want negativity in my space" (Erica, 17, Facebook user). Others mentioned the permanency of such a comment, stating that if they didn't delete it, it would stay on their profile page, and all their friends would be able to see it.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Adolescent females' use of social networking sites is a complex topic that is just beginning to be explored. Throughout the course of this research, topics arose concerning the participants' communication habits and styles, the effects of negative and positive comments on their real life selves, forming relationships with peers, methods of expressing themselves through their profile content and ways of presenting themselves to their online and offline friends. Below, the findings will be discussed in relation to the previously identified research questions, as well as to the literature on Uses and Gratifications theory.

### RQ1: "How do adolescent females, age 14-17, use social networking websites for communication purposes?"

When discussing the idea of sharing information through social networking sites with the participants, it is clear that they have a need to access others' information immediately, and that they feel an obligation to share information about themselves in return. Most participants mentioned at least one instance where they found out about a major event in the life of a friend through a Facebook status or MySpace bulletin, not seeming offended by this in the least, most having done this themselves. It seems that it has become commonplace for this age group to receive and give major life updates to others in this mass context, a one-stop shop for letting everyone know that they have been accepted into college, have broken up with their boyfriend, or even have had a death in the family. While creating a status or bulletin containing this information reaches *everyone* on a user's friend's list, this did not hinder the participants from posting these deeply personal updates. The participants seemed to lack awareness of this public

way they were communicating. To them, only the people they wanted to see their updates were able to view them, rather than their entire friends list, as is actually the case.

For the adolescent females in this study, receiving updates from their friends in this manner seems to create a less active form of communication, pointing to an almost passive rather than active style of communicating with each other. Rather than put forth the effort to actively keep in touch with friends who have moved out of state, or who even have separate class schedules, the participants rely on social networking sites to keep in touch for them with little to no effort. By doing nothing, the users see what others are doing through their status updates and uploaded pictures.

Besides removing someone from a friends list altogether, it is nearly impossible to *not* stay in touch with friends who have physically left one's life when they remain connected through a social networking site. It seems that by exerting minimal effort, a user is able to send a message to an out of touch friend, or use the instant message-reminiscent "chat" feature available on both Facebook and MySpace to have a quick real-time conversation to catch up on the latest news. The findings indicate that passive forms of communication among this age group are replacing the more active efforts of picking up the phone to place a direct call, or even the more modern method of sending an email.

Although this may be a less active form of communication, keeping in touch with friends through social networking sites does appear to assist these participants in maintaining and nurturing previously formed friendships. Maintaining friendships is one characteristic of social competency, according to Valkenburg and Peter (2005) and their study on teenage Internet usage. Social competence refers to an adolescent's achievement of social, emotional and behavioral skills necessary for complete social adaptation (2005). Also involved in achieving

social competence is the formation of social support systems, or cultivating and maintaining close friendship circles and ties with family members (Harman, et al., 2005). Social networking sites allow the participants to see virtual representations of their social supports systems and friendship circles. In these ways, it seems as though the participants' social networking communications and interactions support their journey towards social competence and a healthy communication style. Also connected to adolescent peer relationships was Harman's 2005 study, which related social anxiety and phobias with a lack of peer interactions in adolescence (Harman, et al., 2005). With most of the participants in the current study recognizing communicating through social networking sites as socializing and connecting with peers, these sites seem to be filling that need for socialization, and thus could potentially be reducing stress, anxiety or social phobias.

According to the participants, receiving and expressing social support through these sites also seems to be a more passive way of communicating feelings to friends. As opposed to calling each close friend and family member to tell them about a college acceptance, the participants simply have to post the news on their Facebook status and wait for the congratulation messages to roll in. The participants were able to express their own congratulations messages to their friends in this same manner. Upon reading a similar status update from a friend, the participants only have to click the "like" button available on Facebook, which appears on the friend's page as the phrase "Jane Doe liked your status". Participants mentioned feeling validated when friends "liked" their status updates. For the adolescent females in this study, instead of phone calls or in-person support, a simple button-click serves as a message of support from one online friend to another. While easier to spread an exciting message or news this way, it also seems to be taking users one step back from active communication and face-to-face relationships.

This relates to the 2007 study conducted by Valkenburg and colleagues, which illustrated the “heightened vulnerability about the self” during the adolescent years and the need for positive feedback felt during this time (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). These researchers stated that positive feedback was able to alleviate some of the anxiety over peer acceptance. The current study participants seemed to agree, stating that they felt validation when someone left them a positive comment or “liked” one of their status updates. This “evaluative feedback” seemed to cause the participants to feel increased self-esteem and social recognition from peers and other “friends” in terms of their physical appearance, profile content and other status updates about their lives (Stritzke, et al., 2004).

Also indicated by the participants was a preference of communication through social networking websites due to the convenience of talking to multiple friends at once, something that can’t be accomplished by the telephone. Participants cited this more passive form of communication as easier and more convenient than “hanging out” with friends physically. For example, one participant said, “It’s easier [because] you don’t have to get showered and run out of the house” to see friends in person (Erica, 17, Facebook user). Danielle had also mentioned that, “If you want to, like, just sit there you can talk to people. It’s easier” (Danielle, 15, Facebook and MySpace user). The participants seem to be consciously trading seeing and communicating with their friends in person for talking to them through Facebook and MySpace. When asked if they felt that talking online was socializing with friends, most agreed that it was. Social networking sites seem to have changed what socializing and communicating mean for these participants. Whether this idea of socializing stays with these participants as they get older remains to be seen.



Another interesting topic was that of the “pause” time all participants mentioned in some capacity. The asynchronous communication featured on social networking sites appears to be altering the ways adolescent females are thinking about communicating with peers. They seem to be, essentially, more articulate and precise communicators because of this intermission between responses. The participants report being able to take time to formulate their responses to each other, highlighting wittiness, intelligence or compassion in ways they would not be able to do instantaneously in real-time conversations. This also presents further questions, as this reliance on pause time may affect their communication abilities in real life if they have come to expect a length of time to form their responses.

Additionally, as one participant had mentioned, “there’s no shyness online” (Carmen, 16, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter user). Participants were better able to speak openly and honestly to friends and acquaintances without them being physically present. This confidence helped them to break down barriers created by introverted personality characteristics or social boundaries that may otherwise prevent candid and spontaneous communication. Thiel (2003) also suggested that more candid conversations were nurtured in virtual space as opposed to physical worlds. Thiel suggested that online, her participants were better able to express themselves fully and openly without friends physically present (Thiel, 2003). While participants in the present study seemed to agree with this, candid and open communication only in online environments may also present a problem, as participants reported at times being meaner and more brutally honest with friends online because of the absence of their facial expressions and reactions. This again depicts a reliance on online communication in place of in-person communication to overcome shyness or engage in conflict. If these participants report that they

would “rather say it to the computer screen,” how will they deal with in-person conflicts or overcome shyness in their real lives without the protection of the screen?

Researchers in the past several years have also addressed the honesty and negativity that appears online that is not apparent in an adolescent’s physical world. Bortree (2005) observed that the adolescent females’ blogs she read were more in line with the authors’ true feelings and personality characteristics. While she viewed this as a positive form of self-expression, Douglas (2001) felt that this open and honest communication could lead adolescents to be more negative and hostile than they would be in face-to-face situations, which was also apparent in the participants’ responses for the present study. The participants admitted to being more “nasty” because of the lack of physical and verbal cues present online.

Additionally, using a friend “add” (adding a user to your friend’s list) as a way of getting to know a peer seems to allow classmates or other acquaintances to begin to form relationships with each other that may not have formed organically due to, again, shyness or social barriers. “Adding” each other creates new connections and decreases the awkwardness the participants felt about approaching someone in person. It appears that friendships can build and develop by this simple “add” as users discover commonalities through profile content or status updates that can then be transferred into in-person communication. However, this again portrays a more passive mode of communication. Adding someone to a social networking friend’s list as opposed to approaching them in person and introducing oneself is a more indirect way of informing someone that you want to be their friend.

RQ2: “How do adolescent females, age 14-17, use social networking websites for self-presentation and identity exploration?”

The participants also seemed to be utilizing certain features of social networking sites to present themselves in specific ways to those on their friends list. By creating their own profile content, only information users want to appear is available for their online friends to view. The participants are essentially creating the image they want to portray to others by editing their profile content and displaying certain photos of themselves. This is related to Stern’s 2004 look at adolescent home pages on the web, a study done prior to the social networking website explosion of 2005. This content analysis had revealed that the adolescents used these pages to express their changing interests and moods, also displaying creative writing projects or other hobbies to their viewers (Stern, 2004). It seems that adolescent females today are using their social networking profile content in much the same way these adolescents were using their homepages – to express and define themselves in their own ways.

Participants mentioned editing the relationship status section of a social networking profile as a main way of providing and receiving personal information. Many participants cited that their relationship status is the most frequently edited element of their profile page, other than their display photo (“default picture”). This highlights the concern that seems to be felt among the participants in having defined identity characteristics. When they are single, they want everyone to know they are available; when in relationships, all their friends should be aware of it. This is one way of defining who they are in relation to others, as well as making sure all their friends are aware of this aspect of their identities.

Concerning the participants’ self-expression through social networking websites, they mentioned that posting their writing, photographs or other art onto their profiles allowed others

to see them as they saw themselves. They were able to use this art as a way of further articulating the self they presented outwardly to both their online social networks and their real life social circles, something the participants seemed to value in their search for their own identity. They want others to acknowledge the artistic side of them as a piece of who they are. The participants did not mention any hesitation in posting their personal poems or photographs, but did not seem motivated by the thought of others viewing their art. Rather, it was just one part of their profile, one piece of the self they were creating through their social networking profile content.

Participants also used verbal expression through social networking sites to create a crafted image for communicating with friends. The pause time between responses allocates minutes, hours or days for the participants to create a textual representation of themselves. Participants could make themselves appear raucously funny, supremely intelligent or compassionately thoughtful by taking the time to word their responses in just the right manner. These self-presentations may or may not be accurate in the ways the participants truly behave and feel, but they are real in the ways they are received by others. A participant may report being shy and introverted in real life but through the lag in social networking communication, she may be able to portray herself as outgoing and personable to all her online friends. Her online friends then perceive and know her as an outgoing person. The text the participants are displaying is assisting them in presenting themselves on their own terms.

Through feedback received from social networking site friends, the participants were able to physically see how others' perceive them, and try to alter their appearance or personality in order to improve these perceptions. Feedback concerning a user's physical appearance (as seen in a photo on their social networking profile) made the participants conscious of what others thought of them. This is similar to the results that Stern presented in his 2004 study. When his

participants received positive feedback about their homepage content, they reported that it validated their identities and created a positive self-image (Stern, 2004). This seemed to hold true for the participants in the present study.

Positive feedback boosted the participants' confidence, and confirmed that the way they were perceived was the way they wanted others to see them. As many of the participants reported, if friends complimented their clothing in a photo, they would consciously wear that clothing more in public. Negative feedback seemed to do the opposite. When asked if they had ever received a negative comment on their profile or a picture, nearly all participants said that this had never happened to them, but were quick to point out an instance where it had happened to someone they knew and how that person had reacted to it. They did, however, admit that a negative comment about their physical appearance would cause them to attempt to make modifications of their appearance in person, for example by ceasing to wear certain clothing or hairstyles. This is related to Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) look at adolescent uses of social networking sites. The authors found that negative feedback in social networking sites negatively affected an adolescent's self esteem and self worth (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). This seems to reflect the importance the participants in the present study appeared to place on how others perceive them, and the extent they would go to try to manage these perceptions, both online and in person.

Overall, the results from the present study suggest a shift in communication styles among the participants, as well as an increase in the ways that adolescent females are controlling their image in order to present themselves to their online and offline worlds. They seem to be relying on their computer screen and virtual worlds to construct their physical and verbal selves, which are then perceived by the physical world as truth. Additionally, they may be hiding behind these

virtually constructed selves when communicating thoughts, feelings and support and engaging in conflict with peers. Social networking sites seem to be changing the ways these adolescent females see the world and their place in it, and may be altering the ways they communicate for the rest of their lives.

### Adolescent Females' Uses and Gratifications of Social Networking Websites

As previously stated, the five identified uses of social networking sites among the adolescent female participants were 1) Information Sharing, 2) Convenient Communication, 3) Self-Expression, 4) Friendship Formation and 5) Social Support. These appear to be closely related to the original five categories of motivations presented by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) – 1) Cognitive needs, 2) Affective needs, 3) Personal Integrative needs, 4) Social Integrative needs and 5) Tension Release/Escapism needs.

*Cognitive needs*, or the need to gain knowledge and understanding, could be related to Information Sharing in the present study. The participants in the current study sought out information on other users/friends in order to increase their understanding about what was going on within their social worlds. Additionally, several of the participants mentioned learning about national and local news by way of friends' status updates or comments, also adding to their knowledge of current events.

While learning of news and events is seen to be closely related to the cognitive needs identified by Katz, et. al (1974), there is also clearly a social aspect to the cognitive needs identified in the present study. The need to gain information about friends, social events or gossip is a characteristic not yet seen in the uses and gratifications literature when describing cognitive needs. This appears to reflect the adolescent participants' felt obligation to remain up

to date and aware of what is happening in their social worlds, lest they be left out or overlooked. For example, learning that a friend has recently become single may not serve a cognitive need for another demographic, but for the adolescent female participants in the present study, this information was important to them and their knowledge.

*Affective needs*, or the need for positive emotional experiences and feelings, can be tied to the participants' seeking out social support by way of "likes" or comments on their status updates, or positive feedback about their appearance through photo comments (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Each participant had visibly and audibly perked up when discussing positive comments received or given in the past through social networking sites. This encouraging, visible, emotional support from friends and family members seemed to evoke positive changes in the participants' moods and self-esteem, thus motivating them to continue providing their friends with updates about their lives through their social networking profiles. These sites also allow friends and family to stay in touch, talk and continue "seeing" each other through posted photos, contributing to positive feelings concerning the participants' personal relationships.

*Personal integrative needs*, or the need for an individual to strengthen their own self-image and to seek out stability and status from their social life, can be seen within the Social Support need identified within the present study (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). When speaking of social support with the participants, many were quick to point out friends who "added" people they barely knew in order to get a larger number of friends on their social networking profile. They mentioned this as almost a status seeking behavior, one that allowed the individual to appear popular among their social circles, perhaps indicating a method adolescent females use to increase their social status within a group of friends or acquaintances.

The frequently mentioned editing of the participants' relationship statuses is another way they seemed to use their profile content to portray their place within their social worlds. The participants seemed to seek out this information from others' profiles as often as they updated it themselves, another motivator for going online and looking at others' pages, as well as editing their own profile content. Recent studies conducted on uses and gratifications of the Internet have also identified motivations of Internet use such as social inclusion and social status, or the need to be recognized as a desirable and popular person among a social circle (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2006).

The present study's findings also coincide with the previously identified need to "add salience to the audience member's own life or situation" present within personal integrative needs (Blumler, 1979, p. 17). Blumler (1979) examined the viewing of TV bulletins by audience members and recognized various ways that they related their own lives to what they were viewing. Referring to the television bulletins, audience members agreed with statements such as "It shows what others are thinking about people like me" and "It gives me support for my ideas", which are also reflected in the adolescent female participants' reasons for posting status updates on social networking sites with personal news items (p. 18). They seem to seek out the social support from friends and family members in order to validate their own ideas and decisions and to "see what others are thinking" about their choices and lives (p. 17). While presented in a different context, with different media, the ideas of personal integrative needs continue to be apparent today within uses of new media.

*Social integrative needs* in uses and gratifications theory is described as the desire to socialize with friends, family and acquaintances, or to have human relationships in society (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). This relates to the participants in the present study indicating their



desire for Convenient Communication, achieved by using social networking sites to have conversations with friends and family members at their own ease. In this way, their “friends” are constantly available for filling the participants’ need for social interactions at the click of a log-in screen. The Friendship Formation need acknowledged in the present study also illustrates the needs for the participants to socialize and create new friendships and close relationships through their social networking accounts.

When examining social networking use among college students, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) also discovered similar motivations regarding maintaining and developing personal relationships through these sites. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) identified connectedness, or being available for friends at all times through their social networking sites, as a motivator for using Facebook. Participants of the present study also identified their need for communication with friends to be available on their own terms and schedules.

It is interesting to note the shift apparent in the social integrative needs category as media itself shifts and changes. When first identified in 1974, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch pointed to the social uses of media in terms of gathering in a group to watch a television show, or using a show or movie as the basis of a conversation with a peer, or an icebreaker when meeting new people. Currently, as was seen in the current study’s adolescent female participants, they are using media to socialize through the Internet world, in this case their social networking profiles. Rather than using media to spark socialization, users now appear to be socializing *within* the media, as participants used social networking sites to leave friends comments on their profiles, or used the chat feature to carry on conversations, introduce themselves or even have arguments. Socialization is now occurring within the media itself, rather than within the real world.

The ways the participants' reported expressing themselves through art, pictures and text on their social networking profiles could be related to the original category of *tension release and escapism needs*, or the need for diversion and stress relief from daily life (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). By posting their own works of art or poetry, the participants are able to express their emotions in their own ways. For example, one participant mentioned letting go of stress and other negative emotions by posting her poetry on her MySpace page. Other participants reported logging into their social networking site of choice when arriving home from school, as a way to relax after a long day, or to pass the time before beginning homework. This again points to a shift in this category as media evolve. Whereas original tension release needs identified watching television as a method of escape, using social networking sites to relax or release tension can still be an interactive experience, for example if a user is communicating with a friend or commenting on a status update. Even when winding down from a long day, the participants were still connected, still communicating with friends and family.

### Limitations

Several methodological limitations of this study should be noted. Because of the small sample size of 15 participants, the generalizability of the study is limited, as is the case with most qualitative research studies. While the sample is one of convenience, a range of demographic characteristics were present among the participants. However, since each participant was recruited from the same educational setting, the demographic variances may not be apparent as they would be within a larger population (e.g. social class or ethnic diversity).

It must be noted that the sample was taken from students at a private school, which does indicate a certain social class. Although many of the students attend this institution by means of a

financial scholarship, they are provided with access to current technology that may not necessarily be available across all social classes or demographics (e.g. laptop computers and high-speed Internet access). In future studies, a larger and more diverse sample may allow for greater generalizability and could also account for variances in family income and social class.

Another potential limitation that should be acknowledged is the researcher's relationship with the sample used for this study. As the researcher is employed by the educational institution from which the sample was drawn, relationships between researcher and study participants had previously been established. While it is believed that this previous relationship encouraged open and honest responses from the participants, it may have also caused the participants to answer in ways designed to please the researcher, detracting from the honesty of the participants' responses.

#### Directions for Future Research

It is hoped that this exploratory study will be used as a foundation for future research concerning adolescent females and their uses of social networking websites. The study generated a framework of themes that future studies could examine further for possible refinement or elaboration.

Concerning limitations discussed for the present study, future research could survey or interview a greater sample population in order to increase the likelihood of generalizability to the U.S. adolescent female population. Additionally, greater variety in social class and demographics could be present in the sample population in order to account for those with limited access to technology in general and specifically social networking websites (e.g. participants of a lower social class or status, more racial diversity, gender diversity). Including more diversity in the

sample population may also improve the generalizability of the study. It would be interesting to also examine other cultures' use of social networking sites among the adolescent female population. These results could then be compared to U.S. findings to serve as cultural comparisons, perhaps between collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

Additionally, a similar study using the U.S. adolescent male population's uses of social networking sites could be done as a comparative study to determine if each gender has the same values during this impressionable life stage. Or, more simply, a comparison could be drawn between adolescent female and male uses of social networking sites, and whether communication styles and habits hold true for each. In this instance, a separate framework would perhaps be developed and used for comparison between females and males.

To decrease the potential for interviewer influence on the participants' responses, future researchers could conduct interviews online, through either synchronous Instant Message-type conversations or asynchronous emailed conversations. It would be interesting to learn how the researcher's physical presence may play a role in the interaction and responses, especially since the participants admit to communicating with their peers differently online and in person. Observing the differences in communication styles when using synchronous and asynchronous interview styles could also be observed – how would the participants' responses change when given a pause in their response time?

Longitudinal studies could be undertaken to determine if the communication habits of U.S. adolescent females learned through social networking sites will carry over into their real lives as they grow older (e.g. How do these females now approach conflict in their real lives? How have they learned to communicate in person, and how is it different from the way they are communicating online?) Developing friendships is another topic that serves to be followed up

with as these adolescent females enter college and adulthood (e.g. How have their social and communication skills evolved? How are they now forming friendships and keeping in touch with out of reach friends and family members?)

These questions and more can be addressed by examining adolescent females who have grown up with social networking websites, as they are the first generation to have this at their disposal as they enter their social worlds and become independent. This communication phenomenon does not seem to be fading, and the participants of the present study showed no interest in ceasing to use these websites. The future effects of their use must be examined and noted in order to provide them with the skills and tools needed in order to communicate and interact effectively in their real worlds.

Concerning uses and gratifications theory literature, the framework identified in the present study adds to the existing theory literature in several ways, and yields itself to future research studies. First, the present study looks directly at the uses of social networking sites, which very few studies have done. Previous studies have examined Internet use in general, online communication and the use of dating websites, however the topic of social networking sites according to uses and gratifications theory yields less than five studies. The present study also used a sample from the adolescent female population, a demographic that has been previously overlooked among communication researchers in this context.

The results from this study help to highlight what was important to the adolescent female participants – mainly friends, communication, self-image, acceptance and keeping up to date with their social worlds. Future studies could employ this framework for use with the adolescent female population, as their needs, wants, motivations and values differ from adults or college students, the populations previously drawn from when examining this topic. Adolescent females

should be approached differently from other age groups, and this uses and gratifications framework can help guide future studies with this population.

Once these aspects of adolescent communication and social skill development are further explored, we can begin to identify where alterations may need to be made within their educational and social worlds. Updates to classroom technology and curriculums may be necessary in order to keep up with the adolescents' pace and interests. Furthermore, if in-person social or communication skills need to be taught and refined in this age group due to their increased use of online communication, the teaching of these skills may also be added into school curriculums or courses. If in-person communication skills are fading with each generation that grows up with social networking sites and online communication, these issues must be addressed before each wave of adolescents begins to rely solely on social networking site communication to make friends, approach conflicts or define their own unique identities.

## APPENDIX A: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

University of Central Florida  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Parent/Guardian of Research Participant(s)  
IRB Study # SBE-09-06452

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Study: A Qualitative Investigation of Adolescent Females' Use of Social Networking Websites

**Principal Investigator Contact Information:**

Janine Pate  
2297 River Park Circle #1218  
Orlando, FL 32817  
janinepate@knights.ucf.edu  
(561) 301-3608

**Faculty Supervisor Contact Information:**

Denise DeLorme  
ddelorme@mail.ucf.edu

**Investigational Sites:**

Lawton Chiles Preparatory School  
201 SR 434  
Winter Springs, FL 32708  
(407) 619-4953

**What should you know about this research?**

As a parent/guardian, you are being asked to give permission for your child to take part in a focus group or an in-depth interview concerning her use of social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook as part of Janine Pate's Master's thesis project with the University of Central Florida. Since this researcher is a Master's student, she will be supervised by Dr. Denise DeLorme of the Nicholson School of Communication of UCF throughout the course of this study.

This research study includes 15 to 20 participants. Your child may also be asked to complete a short questionnaire on this topic. To join this study is voluntary. Please read this form carefully and completely before signing.



**What is the purpose of this study?**

This study is being conducted to explore how adolescent females are using social networking websites in their daily lives, and the meanings attached to this use. Questions will be asked that address topics such as peer relationships, socialization and identity development and management. Your child may choose to not answer any questions at any time throughout the focus group or interview. Both interview and focus group participation will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your child's time. Your child will be chosen to participate in one focus group or one interview.

You may refuse to give consent, or withdraw your consent for your child to be in the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. You may contact the researcher at any time with questions about this study and your child's participation in it.

**What will your child be asked to do?**

If chosen to be part of a focus group, your child will be asked to sit down with a group of 5 to 7 other girls her age. The girls will be asked to introduce themselves using a fake name. The researcher will then ask the girls questions related to their use of social networking websites, encouraging their conversations and responses. This discussion will last about 60 to 90 minutes. This focus group will take place at Lawton Chiles Preparatory School.

If chosen for a one-on-one interview, your child will be asked questions related to her use of social networking websites. This conversation will last about 60 to 90 minutes. This interview will take place at either Lawton Chiles Preparatory School, or a location previously chosen and agreed upon by the research and the parent/child.

**What are the risks or costs associated with participation?**

There are no anticipated risks associated with your child's participation in this study. There are also no costs involved in this study.

**Will your child be compensated for taking part in this study?**

Lunch will be provided for each participant in the focus groups and interviews.

**How will your child's privacy be protected?**

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication related to this study. When asked for identifying information, your child will be asked to provide a fake name to be used in all reports. Real names and identifying information will be held in a private file, which will only be accessed by the researcher.

Be aware that, as with any study involving focus groups, there is a risk of breach of confidentiality, as the researcher cannot prevent other participants from talking about the focus group contents once it is over.

**Audio-taping**

Your child's responses in either the focus group or interview will be audio-recorded in full. Only the researcher will have access to these audiotapes, and they will be erased after use. If you do not wish to have your child audio-taped, she will not be able to participate in the study. You may contact the researcher with any questions about this.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:**

If you have questions, comments, complaints, or think your child has been harmed in any way by this research, please contact

Janine Pate  
Graduate Student, Communication Program  
Nicholson School of Communication  
(561) 301-3608  
janinepate@knights.ucf.edu

or

Dr. Denise DeLorme  
Faculty Supervisor, Department of Communication  
(407) 823-2462  
ddelorme@mail.ucf.edu

**What if you have questions about your rights as a parent/guardian of a research participant?**

Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901. You may also talk to them for any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Participant's Agreement:**

Your signature below indicates your permission for your child to take part in this research study.

All information about this research study and my child's participation in it has been explained to me. I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree for my child to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian of Research Participant

## APPENDIX B: CHILD ASSENT FORM

University of Central Florida  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Child Assent Form  
IRB Study # SBE-09-06452

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Study: A Qualitative Investigation of Adolescent Females' Use of Social Networking Websites

Principal Investigator Contact Information:

Janine Pate  
2297 River Park Circle #1218  
Orlando, FL 32817  
janinepate@knights.ucf.edu  
(561) 301-3608

I am conducting a research study as part of my Master's thesis project at the University of Central Florida. I will be using focus groups and interviews to find out how teenage girls use social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook in their daily lives.

As a research participant, you will be asked to take part in either a focus group or a one-on-one interview, where you will answer questions about how you use social networking websites. You may also be asked to fill out a short questionnaire about this topic. You may choose to not answer any questions at any time. Your participation will take about 60 to 90 minutes. Lunch will be provided for participants of both the focus groups and interviews.

If you are chosen to be in the focus group, you will sit down with 5 to 7 other girls your age. I will ask you questions about how you use social networking sites, and you can answer them or respond to what everyone else is saying. If you are chosen for an interview, you and I will sit down together and I will ask you questions about how you use social networking sites, which you can choose to answer or not answer.

Your name will not be used in the final project, or any reports that use this research. When asked your name, you may give a fake name.

If you have any questions about this research, or your part in it, you may contact Janine Pate at (561) 301-3608 or janinepate@knights.ucf.edu

## APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE

### Focus Group/ Interview Questionnaire

First Name (you may use a fake name): \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the answer that describes you most.

1. I use the following social networking websites (You may circle more than one):
  - a. MySpace
  - b. Facebook
  - c. Twitter
  - d. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Where do you usually access social networking sites (You may circle more than one)?
  - a. Home
  - b. School
  - c. Friend's houses
  - d. Family member's house
  - e. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. The main reason I use social networking websites is to (Please circle only one):
  - a. communicate with friends
  - b. edit my profile
  - c. look at other people's pictures and profiles
  - d. make new friends
  - e. other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. How often do you log-in to your favorite social networking site?

- a. Once a month
- b. Once a week
- c. More than once a week
- d. Once a day
- e. 2-4 times per day
- f. More than 5 times per day
- g. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

5. About how often do you edit your social networking profile? (Please circle only one)

- a. Less than once a month
- b. Once a month
- c. Every 2-3 weeks
- d. Once a week
- e. When something major in my life changes
- f. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

6. How long have you been using social networking sites?

- a. 1-6 months
- b. 6 months to 1 year
- c. 1-2 years
- d. 2-3 years
- e. More than 3 years

7. Which is your favorite social networking site to use? Please briefly explain why it is your favorite on the lines below.

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## APPENDIX D: ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

## Participant Questionnaire, Part B

Name (you may use a fake name): \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer each question by writing on the lines provided below. You may skip any questions.

1. Think back to the last time you hung out with your friends. What about that experience stood out to you?

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2. What other experiences while spending time with friends have been particularly memorable?

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3. How do you feel talking to your friends in real life compares to talking to your friends online or through social networking websites?

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4. How do you feel real life friendships compare to online friendships?

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5. How would you describe yourself?

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6. How do you think others would describe you?

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7. How do negative comments you hear from others affect the way you feel about yourself?

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire! I appreciate your input and am grateful for your help!

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

## I. INTERVIEWER INTRODUCTION

Hello! First of all, I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your day to sit down with me. I truly appreciate it, and could not do this project without your help. What you tell me today will play a large role in my research.

As you may know, this is part of the Master's thesis I am completing for my Communication program at UCF. I am researching how girls your age use social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook.

This interview should last about 60 to 90 minutes. I will ask you a series of questions. Please answer openly and honestly – there are no wrong answers here. This does not have to be a formal conversation, please try to feel relaxed and at ease. Your real name will not be used in my final draft.

As you can see, I will be recording this interview so that I will know exactly what you have said. If you could try to speak slowly and clearly, it will help when it comes time to listen to this interview again.

If you need to stop the interview at any time, or take a break, please tell me and we will pause. Do you have any questions about the project or the interview before we begin? OK, let's get started!

## I. SOCIAL NETWORKING USAGE QUESTIONS

1. Please think back to the last time you used a social networking website. What about that experience stood out to you?
  - a. When was this?
  - b. What happened?
  - c. How did this experience compare to your other experiences of using a social networking website?
2. What other social networking experiences have been particularly memorable for you?
  - a. Why?
  - b. What happened during this experience?
  - c. Can you give me a specific example?

3. How do you prefer to use social networking sites?
  - a. To talk to friends? Please tell me about this specifically.
  - b. To edit your own profile? Please tell me about this specifically.
  - c. To look at friends' pictures or profiles? Please tell me about this specifically.
4. What is the first thing you do when you log-in to a social networking website? Why?
5. How does communicating through social networking sites compare to talking to friends in real life?
  - a. How is it different?
  - b. How is it similar?
  - c. How does it compare to communicating through phone or text?
  - d. Which type of communication do you prefer? Why?
  - e. Which type of communication do you spend the most time engaging in? Why is this?
6. How do online social networking friendships compare to your real life friendships?
  - a. What are the differences?
  - b. What are the similarities?
  - c. Do you feel closer to either of these types of friends? Why?
  - d. Which types of friends do you communicate with more regularly? Why?
7. How does making friends in real life compare to making friends through social networking websites?
  - a. What are the similarities?
  - b. What are the differences?
  - c. Do you find one process easier than the other? Why?
8. How would you describe yourself?
  - a. In real life?
  - b. On social networking sites?

9. How does your identity (how you portray yourself) on social networking sites compare to the way you present yourself in real life?
  - a. What is the same?
  - b. What is different?
  - c. What about your friends?
10. How do negative comments on your profiles affect how you feel about yourself?
  - a. How do negative comments affect your friends' feelings?
  - b. How do negative comments through social networking sites compare to negative comments during face-to-face communication?
  - c. How would negative comments on social networking sites change your behavior in real life?
  - d. Can you give me a specific example of a negative comment online affecting you in real life?

## II. CONCLUSIONS/ QUESTIONS

- A. Is there anything else anyone would like to add to our discussion that we haven't talked about yet?
- B. Is there anything anyone would like to clarify before we end our discussion?

Thank you so much. I truly appreciate your help and all of the great things you have shared. I will give you my email address if there is anything you would like to add. Also, feel free to contact me if you would like to see the finished product once it is completed. Again, your real name will not appear in the final draft. Thank you again, and have a great rest of your day!

## APPENDIX F: SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITE DEFINITIONS



- **Friends:** The term “friends” refers to those individuals that have been added to a user’s friends list on a social networking website. Adding someone as a friend grants them access to view the user’s profile content, including biographical information, lists of interests and photos. Not only can the friend view the profile information, but he or she can also interact with it by leaving comments on the profile, pictures or other update that the user has made. “Friend” can also include family members, acquaintances, classmates – anyone that the user has added to their friends list.
- **Friends List:** A list of each person a user has added as a friend to their social networking profile. The list displays each friend’s full name, default photo and which networks the user belongs to. This list can be viewed and accessed by anyone who has an account; who a user is friends with on a social networking account is public information.
- **Status Update:** A few sentences or a paragraph that a user of a social networking website writes about anything that is on their mind, news they want to share or other information. This status update appears on the user’s profile, as well as all friends’ home pages. The friends have the option of commenting on this status update, but even if they don’t interact with it, it is visible to all a user’s friends.
- **“Chat”:** A feature available on both Facebook and MySpace that emulates Instant Messaging. Friends are able to communicate with each other in real time via a text box on the users’ home pages. Only those that have already been added to a user’s friends list can be asked to chat.

- **About Me:** A short autobiographical description that appears on a user's social networking website profile. This may range from a sentence to a few paragraphs, and can be as descriptive or vague as the user chooses.
- **Comment:** A statement or observation made by a user's friends on any piece of information that is posted on the user's social networking profile. Comments can be left on photos, status updates, links or other information that the user has posted to their profile. Only those on a user's friends list have permission to comment on this information. The comments are visible to all who have access to the user's profile.
- **"Like":** A "like" button is available on Facebook. All content that can be commented on also displays the option to click the "like" button. Rather than write out a comment on a photo, status update or other item, a user can click the "like" button, which shows up as "Jane Doe likes this".
- **Default Photo:** The main picture that appears on a user's profile page on a social networking site. This is the photo other users will see when accessing a friend's profile page. This photo can be changed as frequently or infrequently as the user desires.

## APPENDIX G: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Janine Pate

Date: December 23, 2009

Dear Researcher:

On 12/23/2009, the IRB approved the following human participant research until 12/22/2010 inclusive:

Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form  
Project Title: A Qualitative Investigation of Adolescent Female's Use of Social  
Networking Websites  
Investigator: Janine Pate  
IRB Number: SBE-09-06452  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

The Continuing Review Progress Report must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 8 weeks prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form cannot be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 12/22/2010, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

*<Delete if there are no consent documents.> Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).*

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 12/23/2009 10:11:53 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

## APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT PROFILE CHART

Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Social Networking Sites (SNS) Used	Main Use of SNS	Frequency of SNS Use	Frequency of Profile Edits on SNS	Length of Time SNS Have Been Used
Aubrey	15	10	MySpace, Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	Rarely	1-2 years
Autumn	17	12	MySpace	To communicate with friends	Logs in once a day	Rarely	1-2 years
Kelly	16	11	Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	When something major in my life changes	1-2 years
Hope	17	11	MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	Once a week	More than 3 years
Georgina	15	10	MySpace, Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	Rarely	1-2 years
Amy	17	12	MySpace	To communicate with friends	Logs in once a day	Rarely	More than 3 years
Carmen	16	11	MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LiveJournal	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	When something major in my life changes	1-2 years
Jessica	16	11	MySpace, Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in once a day	Once a month	2-3 years
Blythe	16	11	MySpace, Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in once a day	Once a week	1-2 years

Valerie	15	9	Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	When something major in my life changes	More than 3 years
Erica	17	12	Facebook, Blog.com	To procrastinate homework	Logs in once a day	When something major in my life changes	More than 3 years
Lyndsey	16	11	Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in 2-4 times per day	When something major in my life changes	More than 3 years
Erin	17	12	Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in once a day	Once a month	6 months-1 year
Alexandra	15	10	Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in once per day	Rarely	1-6 months
Danielle	16	10	MySpace, Facebook	To communicate with friends	Logs in more than 5 times per day	When something major in my life changes	2-3 years

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