

## **The Beliefs and Perceived Experiences of Pre-service and Early Service Teachers Using Facebook**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify commonly held beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers with regard to their use of the social networking site Facebook. This study included recorded and transcribed interviews of 14 participants who were either pursuing or had recently received their education degree from a public university in the Midwestern United States. Observations of the participants' Facebook profiles augmented the interview data and resulted in three assertions: First, pre-service and early service teachers believe that maintaining ties with friends is an important function of Facebook. Second, pre-service and early service teachers are apprehensive about the negative consequences of having a Facebook profile; nonetheless, because of perceived benefits, they continue to utilize the site under what they believe are higher privacy settings or after they have policed their account and removed questionable content. Finally, as they mature, pre-service and early service teachers create more stringent guidelines for who they will add as friends on Facebook. Findings of this study suggest that a disconnect in the understanding of what is private and what is visible to the public still exists for some pre-service and early service teachers who use Facebook.

*Keywords:* Facebook, Teacher Education, Early Service Teachers, Pre-service Teachers

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The Internet came into wide spread use among the majority of college campuses across the United States in the 1990s (Goldsmith, 2000; Jones, 2002, Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009). Students were able to use this new and powerful tool to easily access information from a myriad of sources. As each successive class entered the ranks of higher education, they brought with them a stronger understanding and ability to navigate the information found within the Internet. By the late 1990s, comprehensible computing systems were commonplace within most homes. By the time students entered college in the early 2000s, many had an extremely high level of knowledge and competence in the area of computing technologies (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009).

At the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, colleges and universities across the United States began to see a new breed of students. These individuals could not remember a time before the Internet, cell phones, or text messaging, because they were born after these technological advancements had become a part of mainstream society. They are what some have described as the Net Generation or as Digital Natives (Prensky, 2009; Tapscott, 1998 & 2008).

Members of the Net Generation, or Digital Natives, present an interesting phenomenon for higher education, specifically teacher education programs. While previous college and university students of the information age had to learn and adapt to the new uses and implications of changing technologies, this new generation of students have been immersed in the technology since birth. It stands to reason that their uses and expectations of technology will be different than that of their predecessors. One of the unique aspects of today's college students is their ability to experience a sense of community through both the real and virtual worlds using online social networking sites, such as Facebook.

Mark Zuckerberg created the social networking site known as Facebook in 2004, as a Harvard sophomore. Initially, the site was designed exclusively for those who were affiliated with Harvard. A user needed to have a harvard.edu email account to gain access (Cassidy, 2006). Within the first month of the site's startup, half of the undergraduate student population at the school had signed up. The popularity of the site spread, and within two months of its conception other Boston-area schools such as Stanford, Columbia, Yale Universities, Northeastern University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, and Boston College were allowed access to the site (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009). By the end of that year, Facebook boasted more than one million registered users (Fleming, 2008).

Eventually, Facebook allowed all colleges and universities access to the site and as it continued to grow, it quickly realized a market beyond the initial niche of just those within higher education. By September of 2005, Facebook had expanded to include high school students (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). By the end of 2005, the site was being used at over 2,000 colleges and universities as well as 25,000 high schools within the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and it ranked seventh among the most popular websites on the Internet (Martinez-Aleman & Wartmat, 2009; Cassidy, 2006). By September of 2006, an estimated 9.5 million users were registered with Facebook (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Facebook experienced a surge of support from countries around the world. Turkey, Australia, France, Sweden, Norway, Colombia, South Africa, Germany, and Spain were among the first to gain access to the site. Soon the site became a global phenomenon. Eventually, to meet an ever growing demand, Facebook removed its restrictions and opened the site to anyone 13 years of age or older who desired to create an online account. In 2011, the website reported that it had more than one billion monthly active users worldwide ("Facebook Factsheet," 2011).

Facebook now ranks second among the most popular websites on the Internet, being surpassed in popularity only by Google (“Alexa Top Sites,” 2013).

The use of technology and the Internet by college students is not a new occurrence. The use of social networking sites by college students, however, is a relatively new phenomenon. Research conducted by EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) began in 2004, as a means of mapping students’ use of technology. At that time, ECAR reported that 69.7 percent of undergraduates were using social networking sites. By 2007, ECAR stated that 81.6 percent of undergraduates were using social networking sites. In 2009, ECAR found that 90.3 percent of undergraduates used social networking sites. Those between the ages of 18 and 19 reported an even higher rate of use at 95.4 percent, with more than three-quarters of those stating they used the sites daily (EDUCAUSE, 2009). It is apparent from ECAR’s findings that the vast majority of college undergraduates are utilizing online social networking sites with a high degree of frequency.

The creation and evolution of Facebook, along with its viral spread at a global level, has allowed today’s college students to identify, build community, and affiliate with others who are not only within their institution but anywhere in the world that has access to the Internet. Researchers have also found that the use of Facebook has a direct correlation with higher levels of social capital, which, in turn, helps the user strengthen relationships and build a sense of community within their current educational setting (Ellison et al., 2007). At the same time, researchers have also indicated that individuals use Facebook as a means of maintaining their ties with previous groups, such as their high school friends (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). Students are able to connect, communicate, and share thoughts and ideals through a few simple keystrokes.

Along with the perceived benefits of the use of Facebook there are also inherent risks. Much of the early press regarding social networking sites, including Facebook, was negative. Instances of students being disciplined by administrators for not meeting the moral code of conduct prescribed by the school, publicizing questionable activities such as posting photographs depicting underage drinking, illegal drug use, or the posting of racially insensitive comments or blatant threats of crime can be found in abundance (Cain, 2008; Fleming, 2008; Lindenberger, 2006; Nealy, 2009).

While reports of the negative aspects of using Facebook have tapered, there are still many stories of insurance companies raising rates, lenders refusing loans, and employers either passing on potential applicants or terminating their services due to searches conducted on the social networking site (Bachel, 2010). Those who use Facebook may knowingly or unknowingly have their personal information available to individuals with whom they would rather not connect. Previous research suggests that a disconnect between an individual’s believed secureness through the use of online social networking sites and the level of actual information available to the public often exists with those who use sites such as Facebook (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Popp, & Carter, 2009)

Perhaps no group is more susceptible to having their personal lives scrutinized than those in education. As Manning (2010) suggested, teachers are held to higher standards than the typical professional. Therefore, when a teacher, administrator, or another who works with children is found to post pictures or comments of a questionable nature on their Facebook profile, it draws a greater level of attention and likely a more severe punishment. This has prompted some to suggest that higher education institutions may have a responsibility to educate their students,

especially pre-service teachers, on the potential pitfalls of social networking sites and the lasting repercussions for poor online decisions at an early age (Cain, 2008; Workman, 2008).

Researchers have emphasized the National Councils for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the importance placed on dispositions (values and professional ethics) of pre-service teachers and suggested that the assessment of dispositions goes beyond classroom walls (Olson, Clough, & Penning, 2009). Inappropriate or even marginal content posted on a pre-service teacher's Facebook profile could have lasting negative implications. The research suggests there are a number of pre-service and early service teachers who may be posting things on their Facebook profiles that could be perceived as unbecoming of a teacher. Whether they are unaware or unwilling to edit and otherwise censor their profiles is unclear (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social networks, even those found online, are extremely complex. This study examines the use of Facebook through the lens of the Social Network Theory. Also known as network theory or network analysis, social network theory has been used since the 1970s to systematically examine how individuals interact with one another (Freeman, 2004). Humans have varying degrees of involvement and ties with numerous individuals and groups. The connecting ties can be extremely strong, as is the case with spouses, families, and the closest of friends, or they can be relatively weak such as with acquaintances that one may know only distantly (Granovetter, 1973; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Additionally, the concept of social capital, which states social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups, can be measured using the Social Network Theory (Coleman, 1988). Social capital was described by Williams (2006), as being similar to financial capital, except instead of goods and services being produced, relationships are being created and with them the inherent benefits and possible risks. Helliwell and Putnam (2004), however, suggested that social capital gained through social networks is more likely to be positive than negative. Social capital may provide individuals with useful information from others within their network that could lead to anything from relationships with significant others to employment opportunities (Ellison et al., 2007).

The types of informational gains and opportunities potentially provided through social capital depend upon the type of social capital. Putnam (2000) suggested there are two different types of social capital: bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital results when an individual makes numerous connections with others from different backgrounds and from other social networks. With this type of social capital, there is an increased opportunity to gain information and capitalize on resources. However, the connections made by the individual are typically not very strong and offer little emotional support. Bonding social capital results when an individual is deliberate and discerning when making connections to others. Typically, these connections are few and consist of very close friends or family members. With this type of social capital, there are not as many opportunities for new information to be gained or resources to be utilized, but it does provide the individual with more emotional support. Williams (2006) suggested that, while there are greater possible gains to be had through bridging social capital, both bridging and bonding social capital are important to individuals. Facebook can help foster both of these types of social capital.

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Social networks existed long before the advent of the Internet. However, the number of connections one could reasonably have within a social network was limited by constraints of the particular era. The arrival of widespread Internet use on college campuses, high schools, and most homes, as well as online social networking sites such as Facebook, greatly increased one's ability to have vast networks of connections and with it increased amounts of social capital. Identified components of the Social Network Theory provided the framework used in this study to assist in understanding the complexity of the beliefs and perceived experiences of those pre-service and early service teachers who use Facebook.

Social Network Theory, along with previous research conducted regarding pre-service and early service teachers' uses of Facebook, led to one broad research question. The research question for this study is, "What are the beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers who choose to use the social networking site Facebook?"

### **Purpose of the Study**

Research in the area of the beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers with regard to Facebook is growing, but remains sparse. This study sought to further the existing research regarding this topic. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify commonly held beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers with regard to their use of the social networking site Facebook. Facebook was chosen over other social networking sites due to its overwhelming popularity with college students and recent college graduates. The research sought to examine how and why these individuals chose to use Facebook, as well as to explore both the positive and negative implications felt by these individuals with regard to their use of this particular social networking site. The experiences ascertained from these pre-service and early service teachers may identify implications for teacher education and may provide insight as to how higher education might better educate and advise students who use Facebook.

### **Methods**

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen. While there are numerous approaches that may be used in conducting qualitative research including: ethnographic research, critical social research, grounded theory, and phenomenology (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1975; Glesne, 2006; Kaufman, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 2005; Spiegelberg, 1960; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we chose to utilize a phenomenological approach to better understand the beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers who use Facebook. The purpose of this study was to examine how and why these individuals chose to use Facebook. More specifically, it was of interest to explore both the positive and negative implications felt by those individuals with regard to their use of this particular social networking site. The researchers examined how individuals use this site, as well as what fulfillments they gain through such use. Both positive and negative implications expressed by participants within this study were explored.

As a research design, Phenomenology stresses understanding a given phenomenon through the eyes of the subject by attempting to record an open description of the individual's experiences. It hinges on the assumption that "the important reality is what people perceive it to be" (Kvale, 1996, p. 52). More concisely, Giorgi (1975) defined phenomenology as "the study of the structure, and the variations of structure, of the consciousness to which any thing, event, or person appears" (p. 83). The phenomenological method, as described by Spiegelberg (1960), consists of open description, investigation of essences, and phenomenological reduction. Open description is the recording of individuals' experiences as they perceive them. This recording is followed by investigation of essences wherein the researcher seeks to find the commonalities that exist in experiences of different individuals. Finally, phenomenological reduction is employed to suspend prior knowledge or bias about a given phenomenon to come to an unprejudiced description of the phenomena in question (Kvale, 1996).

### **Participant Selection**

Volunteers were solicited to participate in this study by the Director of Field Placement within the College of Education and Human Development at a Midwestern university with an enrollment of slightly more than 14,000 students. This gatekeeping individual had access to pre-service teachers who were in various stages of their educational careers. The study was explained to these pre-service teachers, and the researchers' contact information was given out. Specific referrals were also made by this gatekeeper to include additional early service teachers who had recently graduated from the university and begun their careers. These individuals were contacted by the researchers either through their university e-mail accounts or via messages through Facebook.

For the purposes of this research, the participants needed to meet certain criteria. They had to be members of the social networking site Facebook and have an active profile. Participants needed to be current Teaching and Learning students working toward either an undergraduate or graduate degree within the College of Education and Human Development, or they needed to be recent graduates from this program. Additionally, graduates from the program who were in either their first or second year of teaching were eligible to participate within this study. Those who did not meet the required criteria were thanked for their interest in the study, but were told they could not participate.

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university and protection of human subjects participating in the study was assured. Those individuals who participated in the study were informed of the purpose of the research, the time commitment requested, and any risks or benefits from participation. The option to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined. After clearly and thoroughly reviewing the participants' roles and rights within the study, and answering any questions they had, the participants gave their written consent.

The participants in this study consisted of 14 individuals, six males and eight females, who were in various stages of their educational careers. All participants were either members or recent graduates of the same Midwestern university. Each was either pursuing a degree in education or had recently received their education degree. Two students in the study were undergraduates entering their junior and senior years. Four others were all entering their second year of graduate school. Five participants had recently graduated, but had not yet been hired by a school district. The final three individuals were all entering into their second year of teaching.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews and observations were used to collect data in this study. To begin, an interview format was used to gather data. A total of 12 interviews were conducted. While 10 of these interviews were conducted one on one, there were two occasions where a pair of participants chose to meet with the first author at the same time. All of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. The interviews, with permission, were recorded for accuracy and later transcribed for additional analysis. An interview guide assisted in staying centered on the phenomena of Facebook use by pre-service and early service teachers. However, as participants answered inquiries, additional questions resulted from their responses. Flexibility in asking those additional questions was a central part of the interview process.

Observational data was collected following the completion of the participants' interviews. The need for observational data within this study was significant. It provided additional data to either confirm or contradict the information collected from interviewed participants. Online searches were conducted for the Facebook profiles of those who participated within this study. This technique was employed by researchers Olson et al. (2009) in their investigation of how elementary education pre-service teachers portrayed themselves on Facebook. Within this study, the first author looked at various aspects of an individual's profile and coded the content as inappropriate, marginal, or appropriate.

For this study, the same criteria employed by Olson et al. (2009), was used to divide the accessible information into three categories: inappropriate, marginal, or appropriate. Content that was offensive to the researcher or that would have been offensive to school officials or parents of students was labeled inappropriate. Examples of inappropriate content included pictures of underage drinking, abuse of alcohol, as well as vulgar, anti-gay or racially insensitive comments made by the participants. Content that was coded as marginal were those things that may have been considered offensive to some, but not all school officials or parents of students. Examples of marginal content included pictures wherein alcohol was depicted in the background, but was not held by or consumed by the participant. Additionally, comments made by the participants' friends on their profiles which referenced underage drinking or that used vulgar language were coded as marginal. Finally, content that was deemed appropriate were those images and postings that were not likely to offend school officials or parents of students. Examples of appropriate content included pictures of individuals at a wedding, images of them spending time with their families, as well as benign comments made about pictures or on wall posts.

It should be noted that neither of the researchers were considered to be "Facebook friends" with any of the participants within this study. Therefore, access to their information was as vast or as limited as their profiles' privacy settings allowed.

The concept of validity is one that is discussed in many texts on qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Validity threats, or ways in which researchers may be wrong, as described by Maxwell (2005), can be tempered by the use of strategies such as clarifying researcher bias and conducting member checks (Creswell, 1998; Glesne, 2006). To reduce validity threats and ensure legitimacy in the research conclusions in this study, notes recording observations of participants were taken and the recorded interviews were transcribed promptly. To rule out possible misinterpretations of what participants stated, member checks were employed to solicit feedback about the data and conclusions from those interviewed.

## Results

All of the participants in this study were asked similar questions during the interview process. Each of the participants stated that they checked their Facebook profiles multiple times per day with the exception of two male participants who stated they used the site as little as one to eight times per month. Much of the data gathered from the interviews resulted from stories recalled by the 14 participants within the study. The conversational outline of the interviews sought to provide deeper, richer, and more vital data than a standard questionnaire. While an interview guide with a system of questions was used to provide structure to these conversations and to ensure that important topics were not forgotten, a number of additional questions arose during each of the interviews depending upon the responses of the participants. As the data was collected, thematic analysis was used to make decisions regarding what information was of importance to the study. Participant responses were coded, and those codes deemed important were separated into clusters that were further analyzed.

Three distinct clusters of codes emerged from the data. The first of these clusters consisted of the codes: friends and family, relationships, sharing, creeping, events, and transitions. This category of codes was labeled “Connections.” The second cluster resulted from the following codes: pictures, comments and posts, drama, privacy, censoring, and miscommunications. This category of codes was subsequently labeled “Presentation and Misperception.” The final category, labeled “Professionalism,” resulted from the codes: students, athletes, parents, employers, academic use, high standards, and maturation. The patterns of responses given by participants in this study, which led to the three aforementioned categories, began to create themes that the researchers used to tie together and create a general description of the participants’ experiences. Utilizing the three categories identified as subheadings, these themes are detailed as follows.

**Connections.** All of the participants within this study suggested they had several hundred online friends. The lowest number provided was 300 while the largest number given was 2,000. The average number of Facebook friends per participant in this study was 850. All participants stated that they considered only a small number of their Facebook friends to be those with whom they had strong ties or with whom they were close. In some instances this number was as low as 20. When asked why they chose to keep so many individuals as Facebook friends when they were so loosely connected to them, or in some cases could not even remember who those individuals were, each stated a desire to keep the bridging social capital that came with being connected to so many weak ties. One female participant in the study explained:

I hate to admit it, but there are those people that I have no clue why I’m still friends with them, but it’s just in case. I’m one of those just in case people. I save things just in case. I keep people “friended” just in case. Everything is about who you know now.

All of the participants in this study spoke of the importance of their relationships with friends and family, and how instrumental Facebook was in maintaining the bonding social capital that came from having those connections as they transitioned through major life events. The ability to post and read updated statuses, as well as to post and view photographs, doubled as a form of communication and provided the participants a feeling of connectedness.



Using Facebook to find out about the everyday life events of their friends by reading through their news feed, looking at pictures, or reading status updates was considered by all in the study to be an important way to stay current. Many within this study made mention of the importance of Facebook updating them when birthdays occurred, so they could wish their friends well on those days. However, major life events such as engagements or pregnancies were not viewed in the same light as birthdays. These events required more substantial and significant contact to be made with those the participants considered to be their close friends. This indicated there was a higher value placed on personalized contact versus mass distribution of information. However, the desire to gain insight into the lives of others through their network of friends is consistent with the findings of Ellison et al. (2007) that individuals seek benefits, such as information, from increased social capital, be it bridging or bonding, through relationships.

When speaking about their use of Facebook, each of the participants in this study referenced a value and an importance in maintaining connections primarily with their friends and to a lesser extent with their families. For some, this was a central reason why they initially created an account. All of the participants in this study, with the exception of the youngest member, began using Facebook within a year of starting college. Many suggested they used the site to maintain connections with classmates from high school while at the same time creating new relationships among those within their campus community. This use of Facebook is consistent with the findings of Madge et al. (2009). As these participants continued through their collegiate careers, each spoke of how their use of Facebook changed, but all continued to reference the importance of being able to maintain connections with friends and families.

The importance of maintaining connections was especially the case with those who had recently graduated and physically moved away from their circle of friends. As one participant explained when one leaves college, “you leave all those friends too, you know, and you don’t see them every weekend or during the week at school or in class.” Being able to share life experiences ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary through posts and pictures on Facebook was significant to those in this study. Seeing these photographs and reading these posts created a sense of connectedness even when there was no direct communication. However, for participants within this study, a distinction existed regarding which life events needed to be communicated directly to their close friends and family members, and which could be communicated through Facebook for all to see.

**Presentation and misperception.** Having others pass judgment due to the content of their Facebook profiles was a concern for those in this study. Participants acknowledged the potential for misperceptions of their character based upon pictures, comments, or posts that may be found on their profile but may not be an accurate representation of their true self. Removing photographs as they neared the end of their collegiate career was common among the older pre-service teachers in this study. Each indicated in their own way that they did not wish to be judged based upon their actions as college freshman and sophomores. One male participant explained that deleting old pictures of him at parties was easy because, “I was young and dumb. It was fun at the time, but I don’t need to look at those anymore.” Another participant explained that when he was younger he posted things on his Facebook profile or joined groups without giving them any real consideration. As he matured, he felt he needed to adjust his profile to more accurately depict who he was as a person. He believed that individuals utilized Facebook as a

means to get to know people. They formulate perceptions based upon the content they find and “how you are perceived is ultimately reality.”

Posting pictures, commenting on walls, and listing interests are all part of the Facebook experiences, but as the participants in this study suggested, what one does online affects the way others view them. There was a general acknowledgement by all that a potential for misperception of one’s character could result from the content found within Facebook profiles. Each participant had varying degrees of concern with regard to these possible misperceptions, and most felt the need for safeguards to protect themselves from the judgment of others. Censorship, privacy settings, and diligence in maintaining the content found within one’s profile were key components used by the participants in this study to protect themselves against this problem.

All participants within this study stated that their privacy settings were set so that only friends could see content within their profiles. Observations of each of the participants’ profiles confirmed that nine of the 14 participants truly did have privacy settings that limited the content that was viewable by the public. The remaining five participants’ profiles however had privacy settings that allowed the public to view much of their content.

One female participant in this study had no discernible privacy settings in place. A great deal of the content viewable on her Facebook profile was categorized as either inappropriate or marginal. Her profile contained more than 1,000 pictures that were viewable by the public. Within her profile, the researchers found numerous pictures with alcohol, and multiple comments that contained vulgar language, and antigay references. Many of the pictures within her profile included this participant with an alcoholic drink in her hand and a comment such as, “Tequila anyone?” Other photographs posted did not contain her image, but were still considered to be inappropriate by the researchers. This included a picture of a young man in nothing but his underwear holding onto a bottle of liquor with a comment stating, “WOW, really Meg?! I love how I just have a full bottle in my hand at this point taking pulls, [expletive] cups lol.”

Although this individual believed her privacy settings were placed so only friends could view her information, in reality anyone with a Facebook account had access to everything within her profile. All of the photographs and their accompanying comments were available for the public to view. This supports the findings of previous researchers, that an ethical vulnerability exists for some students regarding their understanding of what is private versus what is public (Foulger et al. 2009; Olson et al., 2009).

**Professionalism.** Many of the pre-service and early service teachers interviewed in this study spoke about a desire that existed within a number of their students, athletes, and even some parents to befriend them on Facebook. All felt a level of separation needed to be maintained between their personal lives, as displayed on Facebook, and their professional lives as educators and/or coaches. One participant stated, “Facebook is Facebook and school is school and they shouldn’t be intertwined at all.” For this individual, it was clear that he would keep his dealings on Facebook separate from those at his school and vice versa. He was adamant that, “anything school related should not have any connection to Facebook.”

Those who participated within this study held a general belief that a high standard of professionalism exists for those who enter into the field of education. That professionalism is expected within the school one is teaching and is anticipated within the overarching community of that school. The individuals participating in this study expressed their belief that being a professional was an essential part of being an educator and adding students, athletes, or parents of students or athletes as Facebook friends could be a breach of that professionalism. At the very

least, this scenario was described by one participant as, “kind of a touchy situation. It’s uncomfortable.” Participants within this study largely agreed that an important way to maintain a level of professionalism was to enact a degree of separation between their personal lives, as displayed on Facebook, and their professional lives as educators and/or coaches.

## Discussion

The examination of the data in this study resulted in codes that provided three distinct categories: Connections, Presentation and Misperception, and Professionalism. These themes were used to create a general description of the subjects’ experiences and allowed the development of three assertions to answer the guiding research question: what are the beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers who choose to use the social networking site Facebook?

The first assertion states that although their use of the social networking site changes and evolves as they age, pre-service and early service teachers believe that maintaining ties with friends is an important function of Facebook. Further, they believe these ties can be established without direct communication. Nonetheless, direct communication is still highly valued with close friends.

Madge et al. (2009) found that as students transitioned from high school into a postsecondary setting, they utilized Facebook as a means of maintaining their ties with former high school friends while they acclimated themselves into campus life. The pre-service and early services teachers in this study echoed this when they spoke of their earliest memories of using the social networking site. Interestingly, we found that because many of them were now making another transition in their lives, they were again citing their use of Facebook as a crucial fixture in allowing them to maintain connections. However, this time, it was their college friends they had left behind, or they themselves who had been left behind by those who had graduated and sought employment rather than graduate school.

These participants referenced a desire to remain a part of their friends’ lives, especially if those friends had moved to different cities, states, or even countries. Many of the participants suggested that they could stay connected with their friends without direct communication. Having the ability to view and share pictures, as well as the ability to read and write brief comments, provided the participants within this study a sense of connectedness. It allowed them to stay current on the everyday events in the lives of others even from afar.

A very important distinction arose concerning those events that were commonplace and the major events of one’s life. Being one of hundreds or thousands, depending upon the extensiveness of one’s friend lists, to discover through a Facebook post that a friend had become engaged or pregnant, was considered hurtful. Individuals were especially troubled if important news was about someone with whom they felt close. In these situations, direct and meaningful communication was expected. The direct contact showed the recipient they were among a shorter list of true friends.

The second assertion states that pre-service and early service teachers are apprehensive about the negative consequences of having a Facebook profile. Still, they continue to utilize the site under what they believe are higher privacy settings or after they have policed their account because of perceived benefits.

In the study conducted by Foulger et al. (2009), the researchers suggested a level of misunderstanding exists among college students with regard to their beliefs of the level of privacy afforded them in an online forum such as Facebook. Through conversations with the participants in this study, it was discovered that all felt a need to either “clean up” their accounts or alter their privacy settings to keep their content hidden. All seemed to understand the information they placed on their Facebook pages could potentially be viewed by someone other than their friends. Nearly all of the participants expressed that they had increased their privacy settings so only friends could view some or all of their profiles’ content. Those who did not indicate increased privacy settings described their profiles as devoid of marginal or inappropriate content. This contention was found to be true with all but two of the participants’ Facebook accounts. One male and one female participant believed their profiles were concealed from public view, but this was not the case. Access to all of their content could be gained through a generic Facebook search. Interestingly, the male participant was the youngest member of this study and the female was one of the oldest, suggesting age may not be a determining factor in the misunderstanding of the privacy allotted online content.

Participants in this study all stated apprehension that potential employers may see their Facebook accounts and have a misconstrued view of them as a person. The content most concerning for these individuals were pictures wherein they were drinking with their friends. Most stated these images were from their freshman and sophomore years of college, and they were no longer an accurate portrayal of their personalities and character. Remarkably, the fear of negative consequences, such as being passed over for a possible teaching position, did not outweigh the perceived benefits of having a Facebook account. The majority of the participants within this study all felt, as long as they were careful with the content posted and with who had access to it, they could still use their Facebook accounts.

Enacting rigid privacy settings, which would only allow friends access to pictures, comments, and other content within a Facebook profile is certainly a start to safeguarding against potential misperceptions and negative consequences. However, we question if any of the participants in this study realized they had anywhere from a few hundred to nearly a thousand people listed as friends on their profiles with whom they no longer communicated. Some in this study admitted they could not remember a number of the individuals listed as friends on their Facebook account. Although a few individuals indicated that they had started to “unfriend” people, no one expressed any level of concern with regard to these unknown and forgotten individuals’ access to their profiles.

The third and final assertion states that as they mature, pre-service and early service teachers create more stringent guidelines regarding individuals they will add as friends on Facebook. These teachers also believe a level of distance between their personal and professional lives might be prudent.

None of the participants in this study were inclined to allow students access to their Facebook accounts. Nearly all spoke about students, some as young as eight years old, wanting to add them as friends on Facebook. Still others recalled experiences where parents had sent them friend requests. All referenced that as educators, they were held to a higher standard than the average person, and allowing students to access their Facebook profiles would be unprofessional. One male participant summed it up well by stating, “I’m not saying we’re not being ourselves at school, but you’re a different version of yourself at school than you are in real life and that’s not always appropriate for your students to see.”

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to identify the commonly held beliefs and perceived experiences of pre-service and early service teachers with regard to their use of Facebook. The research sought to examine how and why these individuals chose to use Facebook, as well as to explore both the positive and negative implications felt by these individuals with regard to their use of this particular social networking site. The participants were a criterion sample of undergraduate students, graduate level students, and those who had recently graduated and were in varying stages of their educational careers. A total of 14 individuals, six male, and eight females, volunteered to participate in this study. All participants were either attending or recent graduates of a Midwestern university with an enrollment of slightly more than 14,000 students. For a qualitative study, a sample size of 14 individuals is considered large; however, the findings of this study represent an extremely small portion of the overall population of pre-service and early service teachers who attend or have recently graduated from this university. While illuminating, these findings cannot be a representation of all pre-service and early service teachers' experiences with Facebook.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and for Teacher Education Programs**

This study was based on one small group of individuals from one Midwest public university in the United States. There is a need for further qualitative research to gain insight into additional pre-service and early service teachers from colleges and universities in different regions. Facebook is an ever-changing social networking site; therefore, continued research relating to the site's privacy settings and users' utilization of these settings is warranted. Additionally, the technology used to access Facebook is constantly evolving. The use of smartphones with internet access has increased individuals' ability to check Facebook as well as to upload pictures, videos, and to post comments. As such, research needs to be ongoing to see how subsequent generations of students, those who have been exposed to the technology since an earlier age, use and experience Facebook.

The use of Facebook by pre-service and early service teachers raises many issues related to social responsibility, professionalism, and free speech. Research has shown that a degree of misunderstanding exists with regard to what is public versus what is private on sites such as Facebook (Foulger et al., 2009). Regardless of the intent, a private comment made on a public forum has the potential to result in severe and lasting negative consequences. Our recommendation to teacher education programs is to discuss appropriate uses of sites such as Facebook early and often. In conversations with the pre-service and early service teachers in this study, all seemed aware that foolish actions on Facebook could result in negative consequences. Most believed increased privacy settings would protect them from misfortune, but not all truly activated their settings. Additionally, the sheer number of Facebook friends many of these individuals had should raise concern as to who has access to the content they choose to post on their profiles.

## Conclusion

Use of the online social networking site Facebook allowed those in this study to fulfill a need to remain connected to both their strong ties, close friends and family members, and their weak ties, acquaintances and distant friends (Granovetter, 1973; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The social capital, typically information, gained as a result of the maintained relationships through Facebook, was a principal reason why these individuals used the site (Coleman, 1988; Ellison et al., 2007; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006). Nearly all of these individuals have had positive experiences with Facebook. As they mature and prepare to enter the next phases of their lives, they will likely alter the way they present themselves on their accounts, but they will continue to use the site as a means of staying current with their friends and family members.

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