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# The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld

ZIZI PAPACHARISSI

*University of Illinois-Chicago, USA*

## Abstract

This study provided a comparative analysis of three social network sites, the open-to-all Facebook, the professionally oriented LinkedIn and the exclusive, members-only ASmallWorld. The analysis focused on the underlying structure or architecture of these sites, on the premise that it may set the tone for particular types of interaction. Through this comparative examination, four themes emerged, highlighting the private/public balance present in each social networking site, styles of self-presentation in spaces privately public and publicly private, cultivation of taste performances as a mode of sociocultural identification and organization and the formation of tight or loose social settings. Facebook emerged as the architectural equivalent of a glasshouse, with a publicly open structure, looser behavioral norms and an abundance of tools that members use to leave cues for each other. LinkedIn and ASmallWorld produced tighter spaces, which were consistent with the taste ethos of each network and offered less room for spontaneous interaction and network generation.

## Key words

community • design • identity • social network sites

[A]rchitecture is life; or at least it is life itself taking form and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today or ever will be lived. (Frank Lloyd Wright, quoted in Pfeiffer and Nordland, 1988: 7)

## INTRODUCTION

In one of the earlier examinations of the potential of cyberspace, Gunkel and Gunkel (1997) argued that new worlds are invented with principles transcribed from old worlds and concluded that:

naming is always an exercise in power ... The future of cyberspace, therefore, will be determined not only through the invention of new hardware, but also through the names we employ to describe it. (1997: 133)

The architecture of virtual spaces, much like the architecture of physical spaces, simultaneously suggests and enables particular modes of interaction. The architecture of online spaces has been connected to a breed of behavior tagged 'cyborg' (e.g. Haraway, 1991; Stone, 1996), viewed as liberating expression via anonymity (e.g. Bolter, 1996), or has simulated real life in virtual environments (e.g. Turkle, 1995, 1997). The positions of these earlier works were adapted to study how the structural features of online spaces influence self-presentation and expression (e.g. Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002b, 2007; Walker, 2000). Recently, research has focused on the structural and design elements of online social networks employed to foster connection-sharing, social capital generation and effective communication (e.g. boyd and Ellison, 2007; Donath, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). This study examines three social networks to understand how architectural features influence iterations of community and identity in Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)) and AsSmallWorld ([www.asmallworld.net](http://www.asmallworld.net)).

Identity and community have long presented focal concepts of interest for new media researchers. Enabling both identity expression and community building, social networking sites are structured initially around a niche audience, although their appeal frequently evolves beyond that target market. Facebook at present consists of 47,000 college, high-school, employee and regional networks, handles 600 million searches and more than 30 billion page views a month (Alexa, 2008). The online social network application allows users to create their profiles, display a picture, accumulate and connect to friends met both online and offline and view each other's profiles, and is ranked as the seventh most popular site. LinkedIn allows users to create a profile based on their professional affiliation and connect to professional contacts within and outside their professional networks. LinkedIn is ranked well below Facebook, as 193rd in the rank of sites attracting the most traffic, averaging about 500 million

pages views per month (Alexa, 2008). Recently dubbed 'A Facebook for the Few', by the *New York Times* (La Ferla, 2007), ASmallWorld is a private social network which individuals can join only if invited by members. ASmallWorld caters to a smaller and exclusive audience and thus is ranked 9571 in recent internet traffic reports (Alexa, 2008). Social networking websites operate on enabling self-presentation and connection-building, but become successful when using structural features to create symbolic codes that facilitate communication and create what Castells (2000) termed a culture of 'real virtuality'. This comparative analysis examines the symbolic representations of everyday communicative routines that these social networks create for their users, so as to understand the significance of virtual architecture.

## RELEVANT WORK ON ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

The research on online social networks examines the formation and maintenance of online networks that support existing and new social ties (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Wellman and Berkowitz, 1997). The unit of analysis is the interaction or relation between people, measured in terms of ties held by individuals maintaining a relation, types of exchanges, frequency of contact, strength of ties, intimacy, qualitative elements of relations, size of networks, global or local span of networks and numerous other variables (Haythornthwaite, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1998; Haythornthwaite et al., 1995). Studies focusing on Netville, a wired suburb of Toronto, revealed that online interaction frequently supplemented or served as an alternative to face-to-face interaction in ways that had positive effects on social capital (Hampton, 2002; Hampton and Wellman, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Wellman et al., 2001).

Social network sites represent a natural extension of this work, as they connect networks of individuals that may or may not share a place-based connection. Social network sites are defined as:

[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison, 2007)

On most social networking sites, users are not looking to meet new people or to network, but rather to sustain contact with their existing group of friends and acquaintances (boyd and Ellison, 2007). In so doing, presenting a profile and displaying connections with others publicly forms the basis for interaction on social networking sites (boyd and Ellison, 2007; boyd and Heer, 2006; Donath, 2007; Donath and boyd, 2004). Social networking sites support varying types of interaction on diverse and differing platforms, and social networking sites such as Friendster ([www.friendster.com](http://www.friendster.com)), MySpace

(www.myspace.com) and Facebook have had a significant influence on the orientation of most other social networking sites (for a timeline of social networking sites, see boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Research on social networking sites possesses a short but quickly growing history and an interdisciplinary thrust. Self-presentation online and impression management present a common point of interest for several researchers. boyd and Heer (2006) studied user profiles on social networking sites as conversational pieces, arguing that user profiles present the basis for a network identity performance on Friendster. Within the architecturally barren structure of Friendster, users display friends to suggest or 'signal' aspects of their identity to potential audiences. In this context, 'public displays of connection' present the center of identity performance and are typically viewed as 'a signal of the reliability of one's identity claims' (2006: 73; Donath and boyd, 2004). It is not uncommon for users to compete for who possesses the most friends, or who is connected to the most coveted friends or acquaintances with celebrity status or some other forms of political, social or cultural capital (Cassidy, 2006; Slotnik, 2007).

More importantly, social networking sites reinforce the social character of online environments by fostering interaction that is primarily interpersonal and founded upon norms of everyday interaction adapted to the online setting. Donath (1998, 2007) found that individuals combine assessment signals, which are reliable but costly to produce or reproduce, with conventional signals, which are not as reliable but are less costly to produce, to communicate trust and identity on social networking sites. A profile and displayed connections present a set of signals to potential audiences, which are interpreted by viewers to gauge the credibility and reliability of information that they are viewing. To this point, Donath (2007) elaborated that site design promotes the development of particular culture or behaviors and identity presentation.

Several researchers employ the architecture of the social networking site as starting point to discuss and investigate a variety of related topics. Stutzman (2006) tracked the types of personal information most likely to be disclosed on social networking sites, pointing out that lexical or architectural differences among them (i.e. Friendster, MySpace and Facebook) contributed to tendencies or variations in personal information disclosure. Gross and Acquisti (2005) further examined how individuals disclose information and protect privacy on Facebook, finding that most users share personal information openly and few modify their default privacy settings for increased protection.

Information disclosed publicly may serve different purposes, depending on the architecture and orientation of an online social network. For Dodgeball users, for example, the messages exchanged allowed members who shared the

same urban location to navigate space leaving social footprints, thus using location to communicate elitism, inclusion or exclusion (Humphreys, 2007). For members of a YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) community, 'publicly private' (private behaviors, exhibited with the member's true identity) and 'privately public' (sharing publicly accessible video without disclosing member's true identity) behaviors were employed to signal different depths of relationships and communicate empathy, respect or inclusion among members of the network (Lange, 2007). On MySpace and Friendster, displays of interests were carefully selected and arranged so as to communicate affiliation with a particular taste culture or fabric (Liu, 2007; Liu et al., 2006). In addition, activities and behaviors can be structured to facilitate particular discussion or interest genres (Byrne, 2007a, 2007b).

In the absence of sufficient relational cues, individuals in social networking sites take the initiative to develop their own codes for communicating likes or dislikes, interest and depth of association with others, as these individuals present themselves online (Fono and Raynes-Goldie, 2006). The socially awkward process of 'friending or not' is resolved by several sites by allowing friend lists, so as to delineate between 'top' or close friends, work friends or friends with limited-access privileges (boyd, 2006). In networks that are particularly ego-centered, individuals at the center of their own networks take charge and adapt network norms to fit personal, cultural and social contexts (boyd, 2006). Moreover, social networking site users frequently interpret cues deposited in member profiles, such as messages on Facebook 'walls' or pictures of member friends, to make inferences about the member's character (Walther et al., 2008). In a context that is markedly non-western, such as Cyworld (<http://us.cyworld.com>), architectural social networking site features are adapted to match the cultural norms of the users and the high-context relational dialectics of Koreans (Kim and Yun, 2007).

It becomes apparent from relevant research that online social networks simultaneously suggest genres of behavior through their architectural elements and submit the same architectural elements to the behavioral idioms of their users, who customize them to connect better their offline and online interactions. So, while the architecture of social networking sites is suggestive, it does not have to be inherently limiting, depending of course on the culture and orientation of the online social network. Learning from previous examinations of online social networks, this study examines social networking sites as space and investigates the differences and similarities that develop among three social networking sites that make distinctly contrasting uses of online space.

## METHOD AND ANALYSIS

This comparative discourse analysis is concerned primarily with how differences in social networking sites as sociocultural systems are

communicated through the design of online space. Building on the previous literature on social networking sites, this study begins by examining how the offline distinctions between social, professional and exclusive are communicated online and with what impact. In doing so, it examines how individuals adapt these online spaces to personalize and customize communication based on their own routines, and the extent to which online architecture allows them to do so. What 'language' do individuals develop as they introduce, present and connect themselves on different social networking sites and how is this language influenced, if at all, by architecture? Discourse analysis is employed to examine and compare the structures of three social networking sites, each representing a different niche and approach to social networking.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder and CEO, has remarked that in designing Facebook, he did not want the site to look 'showy or cool', but rather, 'to work' (Cassidy, 2006), producing a 'social utility that connects you with the people around you' ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), accessed 15 August 2008). Some of the most popular features of Facebook include its photo-sharing abilities and the ability for users to contribute applications that work with the open-source foundation of the website, constantly refreshing and rejuvenating content, which presents a draw for several users, making it popular and, for some, addictive (Cassidy, 2006). Even though Facebook is accessible to everyone, some argue that it contains a built-in demographic bias, as not only is internet access and literacy required to enjoy its privileges (Hargittai, 2007), but its initial user base was structured around privileged educational institutions and thus carries an American bourgeois element (boyd, 2007, in Johnson, 2007).

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site, which 'brings together your professional network', with the tagline that 'relationships matter' (LinkedIn, 2007). LinkedIn users usually affiliate with their work network and use the site to maintain a list of contact details for people they know and trust within their line of work, termed 'connections'. This network of contacts is employed to maintain communication, trade information and refer each other. The site employs a 'gated-access approach', meaning that connecting with others requires either a pre-existing relationship or the intervention of a mutual contact, which is a mechanism designed to facilitate trust among members.

ASmallWorld is an online social network site that shares many features in common with other social networking sites, such as user profiles, linked to friends termed 'network', an event calendar, private messaging and discussion boards, but unlike others, it is a private community. Members must be invited by existing members with inviting privileges; members with inviting privileges tend to be individuals with large networks, frequent travel and

higher levels of social activity, who have been members for at least a year. Dubbed 'snobster', by critiques, ASmallWorld claims a VIP assortment of members including supermodels, European royalty, celebrities, actors, directors and an assortment of what the network administrators determine to be prominent or affluent individuals (Frank, 2007; Jardin, 2005).

As these three social networking sites connect various geopolitical, economic, social and cultural constituents, this comparative analysis also examined the formation of subnetworks, subcultures of taste or online 'caste' systems that reinforce or question existing inequalities. Within this complex system of replicating one's social offline networks online, the extent to which the internet can retain its reputation as the great social equalizer is debatable. In spaces where validation of offline identity is a requirement for admission, how is the liberating aspect of online expression compromised as individuals enter networks with their real-life baggage, carrying with them class, gender and ethnic assumptions that characterize them in their offline existence? How is space used to communicate, reiterate or de-emphasize gender, class and ethnic distinctions? What is the historical significance of all this, and how may the growing popularity of online networks influence the course of the internet as a medium? Do some spaces become 'more equal than others', as access to technology and literacy are no longer enough to bridge a digital divide that is unfolding in a new direction, supporting an online information caste system? These are the questions that guide this discourse analysis.

For the purposes of this study, social networking site architecture is defined as composite result of structure, design and organization, and this analysis focuses on these combined three components with the understanding that they are all specified by programming code. As a registered member to all three, the researcher surveyed and compared content over a 10-month period, from the index page of the site to various pages, sub-sites and capabilities provided through the site organizational structure. The study focused on the architectural options offered by the social networking site provider. Profiles were examined subsequently to the extent that they adopted, rejected or modified these architectural options, but the core of the analysis focused on the options provided, not a content analysis of profiles. However, in the course of the analysis a varying number of profiles was examined, depending on the affordances of each network. A greater number of profiles was publicly available via Facebook, resulting in the perusal of more than 600 profiles, approximately 300 from LinkedIn, and a little over 100 from A SmallWorld, as it presented the most restricted network. In addition, more than 100 groups, at least 10 networks and several dozen applications were examined, as well as additional features such as discussion threads (ASmallWorld), news features, stories and items (ASmallWorld) or announcements made (Facebook). For all the networks, site documents (privacy statements, terms of use, help features,

similar items) were read and monitored on a bi-weekly basis. News stories appearing in the mainstream and alternative press about the three networks were monitored and consulted. Content, aesthetics and structure were analyzed so to inform how online architecture is employed to create spaces that are social, professional or exclusive. References relating to the theoretical framework of the study were recorded descriptively or in the form of verbatim quotes. The analysis of each site and all of them comparatively as texts was rooted in a critical approach to cultural routines of signification, centering on the discursive power of social networking sites as cultural texts. Textual discourse analysis was the primary method of analysis for these data, as it provides an empirical basis to conceptual observations about the social nature and function of discourse as a cultural text (Fairclough, 2000).

The social networking sites were analyzed systematically, following the qualitative discourse analytic procedures described by Fairclough (1995, 2000) and van Dijk (1997) and examining texts as sites of sociocultural practices (Fairclough, 1995). Following Fairclough, all representational processes were analyzed, including language, cues and aesthetic choices. Because the language in any text is 'simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and belief' (1995: 55), analysis of text on these sites furthered an understanding of how they function as sociocultural systems and relate to other sociocultural systems.

To organize data into thematically unified segments, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) 'constant comparative' method of data analysis was used. The three sites were visited, perused and employed systematically and repeatedly to get a feel for both content and use. First, overall themes were recognized and coded according to thematic significance. Second, each theme was evaluated in accordance with the critical arguments supporting the research. Third, the discursive elements were clarified along with a consistent process developed during the procedure of thematic coding. The discourse analysis resulted in the identification of four dominant themes around which social networking sites were constructed as sociocultural spaces. They are presented, described and analyzed below.

### **The confluence of public and private**

Electronic media are characterized by their ability to remove, or at least rearrange, the boundaries between public and private spaces, affecting our lives not so much through content, but rather 'by changing the 'situational geography' of social life' (Meyrowitz, 1986: 6). In describing this effect, Meyrowitz (1986) employed an architectural analogy and asked his audience to imagine a world where all walls separating rooms, houses, and offices were removed, thus combining several distinct situations. This merging of private and public (or the confluence of public and private boundaries) carries

behavioral consequences for individuals, who must adjust their behavior so as to make it appropriate for a variety of different situations and audiences. As a result, the realm of interaction and self-presentation fostered by electronic media conveys a lack of a situational place to orient the individual or, as Meyrowitz terms it, 'no sense of place'. The confluence of private and public is especially pronounced on a medium such as the internet, and is particularly relevant to interaction developing in online social networks (e.g. Barnes, 2006; boyd and Heer, 2006; Donath and boyd, 2004).

Each of the three social networking sites studied adopts a different way of spatially communicating private and public. In the social networking sites realm, it could be argued that the private/public distinctions are iterated in three stages. On a preliminary level, this is through criteria for membership, which situates the network within the online realm and specifies how private or how public a network it is. Essentially, the criteria for membership propose the architectural foundation of a network by sketching out the geopolitical borders of a network and delineating its online territory.

On a secondary level, the architectural foundation is filled in to determine access to private information, both externally (by non-members of the online network) and internally (by members of the online network, who are divided frequently into sociocultural categories depending on friendship, membership to groups or offline networks, types of interests and so on). Thus, the transparency of the network is configured.

On a tertiary level within this structure, the ability to *control* one's own surroundings may be granted to members by allowing them to determine which aspects of private information remain private, which are disclosed and under what conditions. Control over display of information allows users to customize the structure of this space, the transparency of the structures and ultimately, the aesthetics of the space.

Each of the three networks examined employ different criteria for membership, follow different protocols for access and permit different levels and types of control, resulting in virtual environments with distinct architectural structures. The three networks interpret and express the private/public distinction differently, producing online spaces that are structured to lend themselves to different styles of interaction.

At the first level of private/public delineation, Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld observe different criteria for membership, producing spaces that are more or less enclosed to the public. Facebook has become available gradually and recently to all and advertises so on its main page. LinkedIn is also open to everyone, although typically, professionals or student-to-be professionals tend to be drawn to it the most. ASmallWorld, on the other hand, requires that members be invited by other trusted members with invitation privileges. Whereas Facebook and LinkedIn present an index page

with relatively open architecture and a virtual door to the network that is relatively easy to unlock or open (through the provision of offline contact information), ASmallWorld simply states:

We have imposed certain criteria in order to keep the network exclusive. To join, you need to be invited by a trusted member. If you have not received an invitation, you can ask your friends to invite you. If you have no friends who are members yet, please be patient.

In contrast, Facebook simply states that 'Facebook is free and everyone can join'. ASmallWorld communicates both verbally and spatially through an index page that is impossible to get past unless one possesses membership, exclusivity and the presence of a space that is truly private. Facebook and LinkedIn, on the other hand, are structured architecturally so as to communicate a space that is publicly accessible. Thus, private and public boundaries are employed to situate the network geographically.

On the second level, the distinction between private and public is communicated via access to member profiles, which may or may not include displays of friends, personal and professional information and miscellaneous other pieces of data. Facebook and LinkedIn profiles are technically accessible to anybody who joins. Both Facebook and LinkedIn provide users some control in terms of who may access their profiles. During the course of this study, Facebook informed users that their profiles would be listed in Google public searches, unless users themselves opted out of that option. Several user groups immediately formed within Facebook networks, protesting this level of public access and raising awareness for the issue, resulting in many members modifying their profiles so as to guarantee privacy. This type of public advocacy and mobilization is not uncommon in Facebook (see 'A Facebook Group to Protest Facebook Groups', nd; 'Protest against Disallowance of Membership in More than 200 Facebook Groups', nd; 'Stop Facebook from Invading my Privacy', nd), which frequently responds to user feedback, however, it is never encountered in the other two networks. LinkedIn also allows variable levels of gated access to a member profile and user control of that access. Users may not request to connect with someone unless they demonstrate that they somehow know this person or are introduced by a common friend or acquaintance. Thus, professional etiquette offline transfers online and a network that emulates the protocol, routines and formalities of professional interaction is created. Because Facebook provides a more complex system of access and control, it produces a space that ends up being used more for social interaction. LinkedIn provides a system of access and control that mirrors that of the professional world, thus reproducing an 'online Rolodex', with emphasis on connecting and minimal opportunity for interaction, as captured by the site's tagline 'Relationships Matter'.

A SmallWorld employs a more rigid model of access to member profiles by enforcing exclusive membership criteria. Placed within an online space that is already private, members are penalized for attempting to connect to others that do not respond to that request; more than three null attempts to connect result in diminished member privileges. Once within ASmallWorld, members have limited ways of finding people they know or connecting with others, as they do not possess the ability to connect or browse through networks or import a list of contacts. They can only connect to offline acquaintances or friends that they know to be on ASmallWorld and have little option to expand outside their present network of friends, as such unsuccessful attempts are potentially penalized. ASmallWorld administers access to and control of member profiles centrally and rigidly. Member privacy is protected, but primarily through restricting interaction. For example, extensive perusal of discussion boards supported by the network revealed that most messages were one-directional and non-interactive, presenting simple posts or inquiries. Members then chose to respond usually through private, off-network messaging and group discussions were rare. The result was an online space with centrally administered layers of access and control; a two-dimensional space that resembles an online magazine about high end resorts and luxury products, supporting minimal social interaction.

ASmallWorld attempts to erect the boundaries lifted by electronic media and, to recall Meyrowitz's metaphor, reconstitutes for its members 'a sense of place' by providing a private space and enclosing within it an audience of members with whom any individual member may feel comfortable. Audiences are known and not negotiated; in fact, the ability to negotiate with unknown audiences is restricted. The more present the boundaries or wall structures that enforce the sense of place, the less visible and accessible these members become to each other. Similarly, LinkedIn employs an architecture that provides its members with a 'professional sense of place', thus enabling and suggesting professional modes of interaction: referrals, introduction, networking, professionally related questions, answers and conversation. In contrast, Facebook allows users to determine the balance between what is made public and what remains private, allowing them to control access. Of course, Facebook frequently opens up its architecture to third parties, thus jeopardizing user privacy, leading to vocal protest articulated within that same architecture. All three social networking sites adopt an architecture that functions, but leads into different modes of interaction. The level, type and tone of interaction in all three social networking sites is connected directly to each network's treatment of private and public boundaries.

### **Self-presentation in privately public and publicly private spaces**

Within these spaces of variable publicity and privacy, different modes of self-presentation emerge. Erving Goffman (1959) has described the process of

self-presentation as a performance taking place on a single or multiple stages, and several scholars have applied his dramaturgically influenced theory to self-presentation online via personal homepages (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker, 2000) and via social networking sites (Donath, 2007; Donath and boyd, 2004). The performance associated with self-presentation can be understood as 'face', and individuals possess several 'faces' depending on the situational context (Goffman, 1967). Faces are comprised of intentional impressions given or 'expressions given', and unintentional impressions given off or 'expressions given off' (Goffman, 1959). It has been argued that the online environment presents an ideal environment for presenting a performance of the self (Donath and boyd, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b). Given the level of control over verbal and non-verbal cues in a variety of online contexts, individuals may put together controlled performances that 'give off' exactly the 'face' that they intend. In this vein, Donath (2007) has written specifically about the use of signals in sustaining self-performances that maintain a level of accuracy and authenticity in self-presentation in online social networks.

A performance structured around presenting a 'face' can be understood as an information game, 'a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery' (Goffman, 1959: 13). On social networks, 'face' is presented chiefly through one's display of friends. As with most social networking sites, all three social networking sites under study structure their member profiles around the display of friends and prompt members to describe the self through what Donath and boyd (2004) have termed 'public displays of connection'. Thus, 'face' is established and verified by displaying one's circle of association. Similarly, inferences about tastes, social habits, routines and character are made by the company one keeps. A member's contacts provide contextual cues that set the tone for an introductory conversation to begin (boyd and Heer, 2006). During the course of this study, Facebook instituted a number of modifications to its architecture which enabled members to divide friends into lists, thus specifying which friends were able to view certain aspects of the member profile. LinkedIn and ASmallWorld do not provide similar capabilities, although, during the course of the study, ASmallWorld developed a tool that allowed users to find out their level of closeness (i.e. links needed to reach) to particular individuals prominent in the network. Still, as Facebook further fine-tuned its architecture in the next few months, several user preferences were nulled out or adapted in ways that not always matched original user preferences, thus requiring additional revisions at the user's end. Even though the ability to customize a self-performance is present, it is unclear whether all individuals possess the time, ability and willingness to micromanage their Facebook identities. It should be noted that users in other social networking sites not

under study here balance private and public boundaries differently, frequently using pseudonyms and revealing identity indirectly through photos, affiliations and network membership. These self-performances present more elaborate circles of concealment and revelation.

Regardless, it is through the architectural options offered that the three social networking sites guide this cycle of impression management. LinkedIn suggests a professionally oriented performance, providing templates for self-presentation that follow resume formats. Members may associate an image with their profile, but rarely do so, typically using professionally oriented, ID badge-type photographs. Unlike LinkedIn, ASmallWorld member photos, when posted, tended to capture them at moments of suspended relaxation and cosmopolitan luxuriating, thus echoing the tone of the network. It is not uncommon for individuals to take a cue from the architecture and tone of the online provider and condition their self-performances accordingly (Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b). On ASmallWorld, social class is emphasized through introductions that rely heavily on presentation of location, school last attended and employer. Of course, several members mock this occasional pretentiousness by posting made-up job titles and school names instead of the actual ones (e.g. 'employment status: retired', 'position held: chief dog'). Depending on the social cost of these jokes and whether the network is employed for social or more professional purposes, individuals determine how playful they can afford to be. In fact, it is frequently such purposeful mistakes, errors or misrepresentations knowingly committed during a self-performance that grant it a stamp of authenticity, lest it would appear too produced or choreographed (Davis, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Liu, 2007).

On Facebook, initial introductions may be more playful and the network provides a wider set of props or applications to assist in self-presentation. Goffman (1959) suggests that the 'setting' – that is, the 'furniture, décor, physical layout and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props' – presents the 'expressive equipment', with which the individuals articulate the 'front' or a general introductory performance of the self, as opposed to the 'backstage', where a more authentic self resides. A variety of applications, ranging from ones that simulate non-verbal 'pokes' and gestures ('SuperPoke', 'Foreign Poke', 'Office Poke', 'Hug me', 'Kiss me'), to quizzes that allow friends to compare likes and dislikes ('Which dessert/color/supermodel/philosopher/movie/etc. are you?'), visual shelves that allow members to compare tastes in music, movies or books ('Ilike', 'Visual Bookshelf'), applets that enable flirting ('Zoosk', 'Speed Date', 'Are You Interested?') and a variety of other such props provide the dramaturgical range with which to construct more elaborate performances of the self. Thus this expressive equipment is employed to construct not necessarily a more convincing performance of the self, but a potentially more flamboyant one.

The props do not necessarily enable authenticity, but they do facilitate multiplicity, showing audiences the many 'faces' of one's identity and simultaneously negotiating and presenting identity to a variety of audiences.

Interestingly, Facebook users cycle through these applications that are quickly added on and eventually abandoned in the same way that individuals enthuse about and get bored with new toys, or change through clothing that comes in and out of style. Operating as a virtual wardrobe, these applications or props fleetingly support a performance of the self, only soon to be replaced by the next most popular add-on.

### **Taste cultures, inclusion and exclusion**

In our everyday lives, we frequently express our cultural identity by expressing affinity for material things (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Gans, 1999[1974]) and through a culture of conspicuous consumption (McCracken, 2006; Veblen, 1899). These choices present taste statements for individuals, who compose them so as situate themselves within a particular taste culture, adopt a specific taste ethos and separate themselves from those with differences in matters of taste. Liu (2007) has argued that social network profiles enable such state performances through presenting a carefully compiled selection of interests, likes and dislikes, affiliations and preferences. In line with the work of Liu (2007) and Liu et al. (2006), this comparative analysis of three social networking sites identified attempts to structure profiles so as to signal a particular taste ethos. LinkedIn and ASmallWorld, with their limited capacity for customization, were less likely to feature detailed and planned illustrations of taste. Facebook, with more flexible architecture, provided a platform for these performances to develop, should users choose to engage in them.

Regardless, the individuals in all three networks registered taste performances. The mere act of joining a particular network represents a taste statement. In LinkedIn, the predominant taste ethos is professional and the site boasts inclusion of 150 industries, but membership presumes technological literacy and computer-friendly occupations, which tend to be white collar. Arguably, membership of an online professional network communicates a statement of class and profession. For example, job titles and professional experience present the core of a LinkedIn profile and are displayed with great detail and attention, so as to grant the LinkedIn member the appropriate status and authority. Similarly, ASmallWorld claims the privileged elite as its members, although members are likely to possess a mix of upper-class and bourgeois backgrounds. For ASmallWorld members, inclusion in the network presents in itself a performance of class and taste, given the network's exclusivity. Finally, Facebook originally claimed a similarly privileged public of Ivy League and elite institutions which awarded it an at-minimum

bourgeois constituency. At its present level of openness, it remains to be seen whether it will maintain that sociocultural identity.

On the one hand, following the initial taste statement registered by joining, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld provide little opportunity for taste differentiation and performance. On the other hand, Facebook members, at home in a socioculturally more diverse arena, possess the tools for taste differentiation and performance. For example, profiles may consist of a lengthy, cluttered and disorganized page, containing endless lists of applications and postings which potentially communicate a careless or unkempt taste performance. Other profiles are carefully spatially organized, with minimal lists of applications, some of which are displayed on the profile while others are concealed. These communicate that users are more cognizant of the stylistic impressions both given and given off. There are also minimally informed profiles, which could communicate either lack of interest, know-how or other types of communicative indecisiveness. Use of taste-oriented application add-ons ('Ilike', 'Visual Bookshelf') further supports taste performances. In the applications developed and conversations observed during the course of this study, members debated the finer points of books, gaming characters and evolution, reviewed restaurants and created taste maps for their hometowns, and in general advertised and indulged in taste preferences. This customization makes daily life and network management more convenient. However, as taste cultures carry a distinct socio-economic component (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]; Veblen, 1899), or at least aesthetic commonality which may be connected to class somewhat (Gans, 1999[1974]), one cannot help but notice that a medium heralded as the great social equalizer gains meaning and relevance as it enables its users to construct not just mere self-performances, but performances structured around offline spheres of taste and culture.

### **Tightness, looseness and the organic development of behavioral norms**

The fourth and final theme to emerge in this discourse analysis surfaces constantly in all of the themes previously analyzed and involves elements of situational determinism, as individuals form and adjust their behaviors depending on the cues received from others (Fono and Raynes-Goldie, 2006; Walther et al., 2008). In everyday interactions, we frequently describe these cues along the axes of formality and informality, and certainly the three social networking sites studied present spaces that convey different perspectives on formality or informality. Goffman (1963) chose to use the terms 'tight' and 'loose', rather than formal and informal, and used the example of public streets in different countries to explain how situational properties influence behavior on the same social setting across different communities. Making the

argument that public streets in France are more 'loosely' defined than those in the UK or USA, Goffman explained:

On many Parisian streets one can eat from a loaf of bread while walking to or from work, become heatedly involved in peripatic conversations, engage in a full course meal at an open table café ... In Anglo-American society one would have to look to summer resorts to find a similar degree of looseness. (In any case, Americans tend to find France and summer resorts relaxing for the same reason: many public gatherings seem to demand less attachment and respect, allowing one an easier depth of either private or interpersonal concerns.) (1963: 200)

Tight and loose networks have their advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, tightly defined social occasions, Goffman argued, provide 'extreme situational orientation', thus allowing the individual to adapt behaviorally, leaving the mind 'wonderfully free to wander' (1963: 208). Loose situations, on the other hand, may require individuals to be constantly alert for cues that will help them to determine and modify their behavior. For example, Goffman (1963) explains, the looseness of a cocktail party may require that guests be kept on their toes mentally throughout. Thus, a looser network such as Facebook does require users to be more mindful of interaction, looking for cues to adjust their behavior and providing cues for others to adapt theirs. Individuals who would like to signal that interaction be more formally oriented on their Facebook pages may produce minimal pages, simply organized and with few (if any) application add-ons. Similarly, individuals with more loosely spatially organized pages could invite more interaction from others.

ASmallWorld presents a tighter network, as it enforces rules of conduct determined by the site proprietors and employs a site structure that (unwittingly perhaps) restricts interaction among its members. Improper conduct is specified and members are penalized by not following suggested norms of connection. The network is purposefully vague about rules of conduct, however, members with a longer presence and larger networks of friends were observed to possess invitation privileges, whereas those with a shorter presence and smaller network were not granted such privileges. Moreover, the two-dimensional design, magazine-like format of the site did not suggest any paths of interactivity or loose interaction for the user, in the same way that large sidewalks or big streets discourage the *flâneuring* associated with smaller, European city streets. The effect of LinkedIn is similar, although achieved differently. Here, the professional orientation of the site permeated both textual and design elements so that members became more static and less interactive in their performances, since they were not provided tools with which to become more fluid and flexible.

Additional survey data could help to clarify the question of how users interpret and practice looseness and tightness. However, it can be noted

through this study that networks that establish norms for behavior and communicate them directly (verbally) or indirectly (through site architecture) present their members with a tighter social setting that allows users' minds to be 'free to wander', and cultivates perhaps more esoteric and less interactive endeavors. Loosely organized networks do place the burden of structuring norms on the individual, but the individual, in testing and developing norms, becomes more socially engaged and interactive. It should be noted that looser structures are flexible to the extent that they allow users to manipulate self-presentation. However, despite its relative looseness, Facebook may still encourage particular behaviors over others via applications that promote interaction and spontaneity. Social networks as technologies contain 'inherent potentialities or affordances', which suggests that is 'easier to use them for some purposes than for others' (Buckingham, 2008: 12). The ultimate decision of how to maneuver in the network lies with the user who is allowed the ability to customize, just like Goffman's wanderer of looser streets and neighborhoods decides which corner to turn, which way to walk, whether to interact and when to stop.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis revealed four dominant themes of convergence and divergence for the three social networking sites studied, highlighting the private/public balance present in each social networking site, styles of self-presentation in spaces privately public and publicly private, cultivation of taste performances as a mode of sociocultural identification and organization, and the formation of tight or loose social settings. Facebook emerged as the architectural equivalent of a glass house, with a publicly open structure which may be manipulated (relatively, at this point) from within to create more or less private spaces. Looseness of behavioral norms obliges users to construct their own, but the network provides tools with which individuals may construct and leave behavioral cues for each other. The same tools may be used to project more carefully crafted presentations of the self and to posit performances of taste that lead to sociocultural allegiances or differentiations.

On the contrary, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld employ their own architecture to define these allegiances for their members. With more tightly administered social settings, individuals do not wonder about right or wrong; they conform to norms. Taste performances are not integral to self-presentation here, because individuals indicate affiliation with a taste ethos by the act of joining. Self-presentation is restricted by the limited profile options that both services provide and is guided by the orientation of both networks. The resulting spaces produced are tight, offering little room for spontaneous interaction and network generation. At the same time, the spaces created are relatively more private, open only to elite and professional publics.

The primary point here is that technology not only in social networking sites but also in other online social spaces functions architecturally, suggesting particular uses or highlighting technological affordances. Hutchby (2001) explains how technologies present a collection of technical, social, human and historical circumstances that are typical of the era within which they come to be. From this interactionist perspective, the communicative affordances of technology are seamlessly negotiated among individuals, society and the technology itself, producing technology that is both 'socially shaped and socially shaping' (Buckingham, 2008: 12; Williams, 1974). A flexible architecture is cognizant of these affordances, yet permissive of the dialectic process between humans and technology. While not entirely neutral, fluid architecture highlights technological affordances without definitively determining behavior. The more flexible, although not utterly flexible, architecture of Facebook highlighted the social affordances of the technologies, whereas the more defined LinkedIn and ASmallWorld produced a more definitive effect on human behavior. Neither good nor bad, neither restrictive nor liberating, nor neutral, technology-as-architecture communicates the inherent promise and predisposition of online spaces.

Future studies of the architecture of online spaces could examine personal interpretations of the options provided, and analyze how individuals incorporate, reject or adapt the architectural elements suggested by a provider. Content analyses could consider the extent to which individuals conform or deviate from available templates and the resulting impact on the interaction sustained by the online social network. Moreover, ethnographies of online social networks would be integral to understanding how members internalize overt and subtle spatial and behavioral suggestions and how they in turn adjust their behavior.

Certainly, each social networking site serves a unique purpose, so network architecture is essential to meeting these unique objectives. The four themes identified gain relevance as they help to declare the situational geography of the network to its members, thus explaining how the network will serve as a social setting for interaction. Because virtual geographies are founded upon a fluid premise of evolving connectivity, they are situational and not static. Conceiving of them as static reflects an imperialistic tendency to transfer the familiarity of the offline world online. Because the offline and online worlds operate in synergy rather than in isolation, a flexible architecture permits online social systems to form organically and not as colonies of their offline equivalents.

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ZIZI PAPACHARISSI is Professor and Head of the Department of Communication, University of Illinois-Chicago. Her research focuses on the social and political uses of newer media.  
Address: Department of Communication, University of Illinois-Chicago, Behavioral Sciences Building 1140A, MC132, 1007 W. Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607, USA. [email: [zizi@uic.edu](mailto:zizi@uic.edu)]

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