

2016

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## Recommended Citation

Houldcroft, Andrew (2016). Reclaiming Social Media: A Weird Stance against the Social Marketplace. *Undergraduate Review*, 12, 57-65.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol12/iss1/12](http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol12/iss1/12)

# Reclaiming Social Media: A Weird Stance Against the Social Marketplace

ANDREW HOULDCROFT

This essay challenges the extent to which Facebook defines a “false promise.” The promise, as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), refers to an illusion of choice in which individualism has been kidnapped by an oppressive culture industry. This idea challenges cultural distinction to replace its offer of individuality with the notion of a false consciousness. By essence of this argument, individuality has been engineered through a manufactured interest in which “the diner must be satisfied with the menu” (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944, p. 11). We are therefore prompted to question the legitimacy of a certain “liberty of choice” as the market has inherently limited the range of choices we might make.

Social media, framed in the context of a social marketplace, prompts a similar discussion. Online expressions, whether they relate to posted or liked content, have been increasingly framed through a commodified lens. For example, Heyman and Pierson (2013) describe the ongoing surveillance in which a user’s behavior is logged through Facebook’s interface to present specific advertisements which exploit and capitalize private interest. The site’s data policy sheds further light on these concerns. It explains the site’s willingness to share information “within the family of companies that are a part of Facebook,” while admitting to practices of hyper-surveillance (see Data Policy). These tactics, combined with the sheer scope of the Facebook brand, define its platform as a possible extension of a manipulative culture industry.

Additionally, there remains a modern emphasis on conceptualizing the social network as a tool for self promotion

versus a social space. A narrative of successful image management has pervaded our culture while an online climate of fear enacts internalized practices of censorship and social restriction. It is through these phenomena that we, as individuals, lose our claim on the online social space, relying on a social script defined through commodification of socialization

In consideration of a newly established “weird” approach to social media, I posit that users are acting in opposition of social industrialization. They are informing the construction of an online authentic culture set beyond the social marketplace. I refer to the specific experiences of one weird Facebook community, the Cool Freaks, to illustrate a new way of envisioning social media as a space which preserves private interests and promotes personal expression.

## A Narrative of Being Noticed

First, we must understand that online identity is constructed. The work of social theorist Erving Goffman (1959), while pertaining to offline environments, is helpful in framing the self as less organic than it is performed and presented. Through this lens, the self marks a negotiation of identity in which an individual adapts their image in the presence of a specific audience. A common example of distinction in self performance lies in the difference of how one behaves between family and friends. In the company of family, one restricts their behavior while in the company friends, one might adopt a more liberal manner of speech. This distinction in social behavior between audiences thus denotes an adaptation of identity dependent on context.

Social media relates to one context. This phenomenon, referred to as context collapse, infers that, in the absence of a tangible audience, the web presents identity before a loosely defined online audience which simultaneously constitutes friends, family, and employers (Marwick & boyd 2011). Additionally, this has the effect of condensing one’s complex identity, one which is defined by multiple contexts and performances, into a single image and site of performance (i.e. the profile). This image marks the intersection of competing audience expectations which complicate our discussion

of the online self. For, as some might note, these expectations might be met through audience divisions made by privacy options. However, I contend that, in lieu of a common narrative of successful image management, the individual has been culturally geared to recognize social media as a site for the public consumption of their image thereby discouraging audience division and encouraging active efforts at being noticed before the widest online audience possible.

Hearn (2008) alludes to a similar narrative of self commodification as it is, “marked by visual codes of the mainstream culture industry,” which posit the success of a branded persona, a version of the self meant to be consumed (p. 197). For example, she refers to reality television as one of many cultural texts which has marked the financial benefits of adopting a self brand or persona. This narration infers that, in conceptualizing the self image as a self brand, the individual works toward being noticed in a way which might “produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). In relation to social media, we see these ideas perpetuated through stories of those who have “gone viral” or have been noticed by significant media entities. As Van Djick (2013) notes, users who have garnered enough of an online audience “may receive offers from companies to distribute promoted messages... and be rewarded materially or symbolically” (p. 203). I refer this point to the example of Robinson Meyer, a Twitter user who was employed by The Atlantic for his social media skills (see Madrigal, 2013), to illustrate this point amongst other “micro-celebrities” whose fame originates from a successful online performance.

These stories mark the likelihood of being noticed as the profit gained from a “social factory.” This metaphor of the profile as a factory implies the need for a consistent rate of production (i.e. posting content) as it relates to a demand represented by social capital: the numeric indications of a social network (i.e. friends or likes). In the context of this model, social capital relates to a representation of one’s popularity and, by that same logic, their brand’s success. Therefore, a question of whom content serves is answered by this narrative of self commodification: Content serves anyone whose likes and friendship boost the popularity of the brand;

it serves anyone willing to indicate their consumption of a user’s image or persona.

This narrative then refutes the distinction between a frontstage and backstage self, defining the use of social media as an ongoing performance of social labor (Goffman 1959; Hearn 2008). It enforces a social script in which actors must entertain their audiences to represent interests beyond those of the individual. This shift in the value of private interest infringes upon the social potential of the platform and endangers the likelihood of producing an “authentic” or lived culture through an online medium. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) specifically note the distinction between the culture industry and authentic culture as being the difference between motivated and liberated forms of expression. I contend that if online expression relates to a dominant mold for social and financial success, then it no longer offers a represents authentic culture. It thus defines a deception in which social media markets itself as a platform for individuality while, in reality, adopting a cultural set of boundaries defined by taste.

### **Toxic Innovation of Online Aesthetic**

Bourdieu (1979) describes the notion of aesthetic as an indication of “one’s position in a social space” (p. 206). His work in *Distinction* defines the aesthetic as a look which gives purpose and meaning to the individual as they relate to a larger society. Furthermore, he defines taste as a social sense of classification, one which creates a hierarchy of what distinguishes the aesthetic (e.g. distinctions of beautiful and ugly). The aesthetic is thus classified by taste within a hierarchy of its accordance to social expectations. In relation to our previous discussion, we might regard the image or brand as a user’s aesthetic classified by their online behavior.

For example, Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) note how the information a user displays informs elements of their aesthetic. Their observations of Facebook activity related to liking certain brands indicated how this information illustrates “actual” and “ideal” versions of identity. An actual like might reflect one’s personal interest in a film or restaurant whereas the ideal like remains associated

to brands which communicate maturity or professionalism. Both forms of information speak on behalf of a user's character or ethos in this way. Several of the responses in this study indicated how debilitating the relationship between information and aesthetic was, expressing a fear that they might make a wrong choice based on personal preferences. One user noted that, "sometimes it's just best to say nothing," (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, p.403) as taste remains a difficult thing to read in the face of an online audience. In short, this sentiment expresses an aversion toward personal expression as it may or may not threaten their brand.

If the concern for usage lies in preserving the brand and its reception, then I once more affirm that what is reflected in social media is rarely personal or individualistic. The virtual image, in addition to being a product, is framed through a certain marketable aesthetic which communicates a detached "ideal" self. This tailored self reflects one's ability to perform within a colonization of interests; it follows a series of decisions which are worth making (i.e. those which promote the brand and follow the narrative of success). Beyond this, the previous response also indicates that, if a personal decision alienates or implicates the user from what is expected of them, then the individual would rather opt for silence thereby removing themselves from a space which apparently relies on and encourages their participation, a space of social democracy.

Yet, in opposition of the aesthetics described in a narrative of being noticed and through branding literature, there remains a certain call for personality through promotion. For example, Aubrey and Rill (2013) found that users who approached Facebook for its "sociability" functions were rewarded with larger rankings of social capital. These findings, combined with other research concerning online audience perspectives (see Marwick & Boyd 2011; Karakyali & Kilic 2013), imply the need for balancing personal and promotional incentives in constructing a successful brand. This implies that the image created for status purposes, that is, the image which follows the script and its tastes too closely is regarded as illegitimate or overtly corporate. Therefore, the user must maintain a sense of distinction which makes them relatable without compromising the marketability

of their brand.

These messages contradict themselves in requesting innovation through tradition, difference through standardization. For, as the narrative dictates, those who defy expectation risk threatening their brand and chances of entering the workforce. I draw this point to the near boundless examples of those who have posted images of themselves with friends online which may inappropriately depict the consumption of alcohol. We belong to an environment which requests personality while, in the face of its reality, scorns its depiction.

This request further illustrates itself through a survey conducted in 2011 by Reppler, a site which assists in online image management. Across 300 employers, 90% of them admitted to using Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn as a means for screening prospective employees (see Swallow 2011). Yet, among these three, they most often referred to Facebook perhaps in search of more personal or social expressions of identity. This focus would, from my perspective, imply a conflict between explicit and implicit definitions of what is worth seeing: The online audience is fascinated with the reflection of a personal self while assessing its value upon a fine line between creative innovator and alienated delinquent.

I suggest that this contradiction debilitates the user and stifles the extent of their individuality. This call for innovation within the borders of taste draws toward an increasing fatigue of usership wherein the individual is torn between self-expression and promotional performance to a point where silence may be the only answer. Again, this is the offer of a promise: a call for innovation and cultural challenge, set within a mold which limits such options. I further argue that this point enacts the restrictions of social media while furthering the idea of the self as a commodity which must differentiate itself through superficial difference.

### **The Weird Option:**

*"The struggle between tradition and innovation which is the principle of internal cultural development in historical societies, can be carried on only through the permanent victory of innovation."*

- Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

To further my argument, I draw a connection between the previously described phenomena and the critical theory of the spectacle. This theory alludes to the subjugation of “living men” to “the economy” in which the lived experience has been replaced by commodity (Debord 1967). I relate this to the ongoing notion that our private interests and ability to express individuality have been kidnapped by the sociocultural emphasis on social media as a tool for promotion. In addition, we may connect the previous discussion of necessary innovation to the quote I have provided, framing our means of challenging this system: We must reclaim innovation; we must meet a promise of creative individuality.

In this discussion, it is important to note that social media is a spectacle by design. Its very relation to life functions as a mere representation of lived experience, dissecting life into a series of snapshots portrayed through statuses or photos. Yet while the complexity of a lived experience is lost in this translation between actual and virtual worlds, the potential of a virtual or representative space offers its own sense of authentic experience or, at the very least, the potential for cultivating an authentic culture. For instance, we have never before encountered a resource which allows for a level of such intimacy between individuals geographically and temporally disconnected. It is through the offering of online profiles and their opportunities for interaction that we might encounter fascinating ideas, engage in meaningful discussions, and create for ourselves a means of disseminating culture horizontally in the context of a thriving community. I once more refer to the unrealized potential of this environment which has, to this point, been conceptualized as taboo or threatening to the user.

I posit that, in its ability to link like-minded users and to create situations outside of a traditional cultural perspective, the unconventional or weird use of Facebook sets an ideal stage for jamming culture. Lasn (2000) describes culture jammers as those who “take daily leaps of faith, or of courage... that take them outside market-structured consciousness” (p. 419). Using this definition, it may be stated that those who deny the online narrative for success,

those who embrace a virtual life outside of the social marketplace and thereby endanger their brand or image, are those who jam culture. It is by these actions that we see a reclamation of the online space as a site for open socialization and the development of communities which “escape the consumerist script” (Lasn 2000, p. 420).

To elaborate on the notion of alternative usage, there presently exists a new wave of notably postmodern Facebook users. These users, part of a trend referred to as Weird Facebook, are those who challenge the need for marketable or comprehensible online behavior. Their use of satire, irony, and absurdity shrouds their behavior and alienates them from the larger social environment. For example, one of the Facebook groups which belongs to this trend is that of post aesthetics, a page in which users are prompted to share images or anecdotes which best represent their identity and sense of humor. A quick glance through the page might elicit images of dogs wearing sunglasses, stories about users’ encounters with “fragile masculinity,” or self-aware posts such as the following:

“aesthetic: people gradually starting to post uncomfortable, weirdly intimate second person diary entries in this group. please stop.”

These pages envision themselves as part of a Wild West of Facebook activity, a domain in which there are no expectations or limitations. Behavior is not predicated on promotion nor is it defined by a normative social behavior. Instead, it challenges a capitalistic motive to pioneer alternative usage and, by extension, cultural challenge. For, as the description of post aesthetics reads:

In early June of the Year of our Lord 2k15, social factors within Post Aesthetics and its minoroutlying islands had led to a period of general confusion, distrust, and hopelessness. The meme economy had become disastrously inflated, with bad content being exchanged for like counts in the hundreds. This increasing commodification of shit memes, such as Pepe The Meme Frog, Steel Beams, and Tumblrcore Meme Hell, led to a bloated, ineffective content creation machine. Post Aesthetics’ most devoted investors and aesthetes withdrew their content from PA, leading to the Great Post Aesthetics Crash of 2k15.

This sense of aimless expression encapsulates the ethos of a culture jammer. It is by this approach that these users reclaim some aspect of what culture might “promise” in the form of individuality and self-interest. Yet in defining this behavior as oppositional, there exists some tension between Facebook’s interface and these aims. For instance, the system has issues associating these pages with major brands or advertisements; it has difficulty translating these groups towards a marketized model (see Pedersen, 2014).

### **“i just like witches, the simpsons and smoking pot”**

While many of these weird groups remain disconnected either by Facebook’s interface or their separate establishment (there are several groups regarding “aesthetics,” all unconnected to one another), the Cool Freaks community of pages represents a concentrated effort at forming a larger society of alternative Facebook users. Through their pages, each divided by the content it deals with (e.g. coolfreaks.jpg for pictures, coolfreaks.mkv for videos, or Cool Freaks’ Wikipedia Club for Wiki articles), users share information through articles, express themselves through images, and socialize with one another in what is described by its moderators as a “safe space.”

I was first drawn to their community through a mutual friend who recommended their Wikipedia group. After submitting a request to join, I was added to the group about three days later and exposed to nearly fifty posts in my newsfeed regarding articles that members had found interesting in addition to information that needed to be corrected. I had never before been engaged with such a thriving space which prompted its users to create meaningful interactions outside the guise of promoting oneself or eliciting specific responses. This was exactly the horizontal spread of culture which fit a demarketed label, a system wherein information and culture was shared across individuals rather than major media sources. Likewise, this was not a bazaar of competing self brands seeking social capital. It was instead an open forum of personal expression and private interest, one which challenged my own censored usage of the platform.

To understand their orientation within a social marketplace

and to interpret their perspective, I utilized a convenience sample of 9 moderators from the Freaks and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were carried out through email and Facebook’s messenger service to facilitate scheduling issues and differences in time zones. Questions ranged from general to specific, all concerning the purpose of the page, how it is maintained, and what it offers its users that is different from other forms of social media. As the title of this heading suggests, I was met with a fascinating range of responses all of which related to a discussions of brands, aesthetics, and alternative social media culture.

I first asked moderators to provide a grand tour of the Cool Freaks pages. They explained the division of content based on interests and, as previously noted, the nature of a page’s requested content. Each page denotes the specific media being shared while they all maintain a larger element of inclusivity. As one moderator noted:

On a very surface level, it’s our mission to share thoughts and information regarding cool stuff or stuff that folks find interesting-- whether it’s weird pictures gathered from other domains on the world wide web, or bizarre wikipedia entries regarding esoteric subjects, or the funny or serious ideas of other users. However, it is also a part of our mission to try and make these spaces accessible to all types of people, whereas other internet forums devotes to weird or silly subject matter is frequently exclusive to people who are either not affected by racist, sexist, or otherwise violent content, or to people who are able to stomach racist, sexist, or otherwise violent content so long as there is a payoff of that which is cool and freaky. To that end, we try to make our groups accessible to people of color, people of alternative genders and sexualities, people who have survived trauma, or other people that would be marginalised in “other” subculture spaces on the internet in various ways. This is accomplished by 1) creating rules for tagging various types of upsetting content and 2) removing users who are not willing to comply with our dedication to being anti-racist, anti-sexist, and otherwise protecting marginalised people.

By this mark, the Cool Freaks series of pages distinguish

themselves from, as another moderator called it, the “white dude [focus]” which other online spaces represent. These remarks indicate that this group is constructed by and for marginalised peoples with opportunities for expression offered to each and every member. This space therefore meets an enhanced semblance of the “connection” Facebook promises (see Company Info), offering a platform of equal and safe representation. This is further represented in the response of another user who described the group’s political alignment as, “anarcho-communist... something like a third-wave intersectional leftism that kinda works out leftism in an individualist framework.”

I further questioned their thoughts on Facebook’s data policy. Their responses indicated a desire to build this platform somewhere else, somewhere beyond the “scheme” of having their data monitored and sold across this site and others. Yet they noted the same magnetic quality that other weird Facebook groups have (see Pedersen, 2014) in drawing a large base of users in. One moderator respond with:

*if facebook made profit, it's for their coffirs [sic], not ours  
they've done nothing to ub, benefit us for the most part outside of being a  
bare  
bones platform  
when they actually take shitty hate filled messages down and not sell our  
data  
then maybe, maybe theyre [sic] on our side*

Another shared with me their perspective of Cool Freaks’ orientation with this policy:

*The primary goal of the creation of facebook “groups” was to create another method of driving user engagement. By letting people create and maintain groups centered around their interests, not only are users incentivized to stay on and interact with facebook longer, the nature of the groups themselves and the demographics within generate yet another data-point about what is hot with whom. Cool Freaks Wikipedia Club (and by extension the other parts of the cool freaks network) is no stranger to this phenomenon. By gathering together some 37k members with a /very/ high level of engagement we’re a strong dynamo for generating marketable data. That said, facebook no longer supports groups*

*to the extent it once did; rather more effort is put toward pages these days. They get all the tools to see demographics and interaction with the pages and also offer to “boost” said pages for a direct payment, so the revenue generated by pages is clearer than the revenue generated by groups. Clarity appeals to upper managers, yanno? Anyway that’s why the actual features for groups haven’t expended [sic] at all for the last two years and they shut down their group administrator feedback group earlier this year.*

This limitation of group development implies where Facebook, as a company, places its emphasis. If behavior cannot be as easily monetized as other features in the interface, then these more social aspects of the site are not worth developing. This signals the ongoing commodification of socialization and produces a tension between the more social groups and the interface of which does not reflect their interests. For instance, several of the moderators expressed a concern for the already developed moderation tools provided through the interface and requested these features be updated to assist in keeping users from rejoining a group and in identifying those who have broken their established rules.

I followed up on this frustration to question their strategies for preserving the community. The general rule of thumb for each of the moderators is to preserve a “safe space” for sharing esoteric content. To achieve this, the team has developed strategies for screening incoming members of the group by first making the group secret and then briefly perusing a new member’s profile for any indications of a threatening bias of extremist view. This approach limits usership to some extent while preserving the ongoing innovation these pages represent. As many of the moderators noted, these measures are not to limit the ongoing conversations or communications; they are meant to maintain a climate in which everyone feels comfortable expressing private interests. Similarly, each group asks that users preface their content according to a series of trigger and content warnings outlined in an accessible FAQ. This is done to provide an equal experience to each user and to allow for liberal yet cautionary expressions of interest.

Some regard these practices as a “fascist hypersensitivity”

given that any effort to defy the rules of tagging content and remaining open-minded results in an immediate ban. Those who break the rules are interestingly brought through a brief rehabilitation program (i.e. transferred to a page for banned users) in which users “can state the offense that got them banned, prove to a moderator that they are repentant, and be welcomed back into the Cool Freaks family” (see Donaghey, 2014). In questioning the moderators directly, they conferred with me that what they seek in a rehabilitated user is less of a surrender than it is an apology. The purpose of these groups is not to isolate or alienate a particular perspective, rather, it is to keep each view in check in a way which does not give preference to one voice over another.

In addition to these points, my questioning frequently invoked the use of the word “aesthetics.” I had noticed that, in my brief foray with these groups, that there were users who would caption images depicting bizarre styles of dress (e.g. a screenshot of costume designs taken from the 1993 Super Mario Bros. film) with the caption of “my aesthetic.” I questioned the definition of this term:

*HOO BOY*

*well at this point i honestly don't know anymore*

[...]

*the word no longer has meaning but in a way it's...still with its meaning? does that make sense?*

[...]

*so it's the more visual part of self branding*

*and others branding others*

*i actually discussed this with someone last night weirdly enough*

*that i called their aesthetic “mysteriously preppy”*

*and while that's not their self brand*

*it's sort of a facet of it*

[...]

*as for my own aesthetic*

*i just like witches, the simpsons and smoking pot*

Aesthetic, in the context of these groups, refers to visual and stylistic interests. They serve to the same capacity as Bourdieu's (1979) definition in distinguishing the individual while, in the context of a liberal-minded group, adhering to less of a hierarchy of taste. The cyberpunk aesthetic, for instance, may not fall beneath those drawn to a classical or retro aesthetic as these are all alternative approaches to defining the self; they are the defining qualities of a “Freak.” The other moderators took similar approaches to this question of aesthetics, regarding it as a “visual shorthand” for communicating an individual's identity.

Finally, I asked how this group relates to the larger social media environment. Responses noted the ways in which this system is more socially-oriented and interest friendly. They noted the ways in which this model “preserves individualism” and develops a space and situation beyond the pervading narrative of being noticed. To conclude, I will provide perhaps the best illustration of this sentiment:

I think a lot of people in Cool Freaks' have been using the internet as a source of community for a while. I don't know if that's a common thing for people my age, but it's certainly something that I feel is common among the other moderators.

### **The Drift and The Promise**

Lasn (2000) further describes the culture jammer as an individual with “a strong gut feeling that our culture has gone scandalously wrong and they just can't participate anymore” (p. 425). I find that, in these responses, the users I have questioned are fatigued by the dominant culture of social media with its exclusivity and devotion to consumerism. The Cool Freaks do not embody a blatant revolt to this system, rather, they represent a dissent from the dominant voice of digital culture, offering those who deny the label of a “Facebook™er” and those whose tastes alienate them a safe space to express themselves. This is a call for reclaiming the creative experiences of socialization and the construction of an environment we may drift through.

The Cool Freaks encourage the derive, “the drift,” to which one approaches “the whole spectrum of feelings you encounter by

chance in everyday life” (Lasn 2000, p. 417). They connect individuals whose expressions are innovative and free from expectation offering them the opportunity to meet with individuals and encounter bits of our culture by mere chance. There is no inherent goal beyond preserving the sanctity of the space thus freeing us from any mental slavery an audience might instill in our usership. Their groups offer liberalizations of taste and brief interactions with esoteric texts and subjects which are not inherently judged or ranked within the society itself, but offered to users in what can only be described as an intimate or private relationship.

This is not a Shangri-La set beyond a consumerist framework, for all of this activity is still related to a monetized system of surveillance; it instead offers a challenge to modern conceptualizations of social media. The ability to create these spaces, these situations outside of the climate Hearn (2008) describes defines a new potential for Facebook as a site in which we may create an authentic culture. This brief look into the alternative use of social media provides a glimmer of hope for individualist frameworks and may, in some sense, challenge the narrative of the brand as oppressive or limiting. It thus provides the backstage our cultural climate disadvantages and illustrates the sense of community which might be achieved in providing a space for expressing private interests. If we could foster such spaces and label them as more than weird or freaky or abnormal, then we might pave a new road for digital communications, one which remains all-inclusive and perhaps greater serves the needs of our presently fatigued public.

Until then, I conclude that Facebook marks the intersection of the mass culture industry and authentic culture. It provides a space which, according to the branding narrative, discourages individuality while providing a chance for this new wave of usage to break from the capitalistic script, to realize the sense of social democracy this sphere prides itself upon. I imply that, through using an extension of the mass culture industry (i.e. Facebook), we might reclaim its purpose and adjust its meaning to make it our own and to serve the greater public. To draw on Adorno and Horkheimer’s metaphor of the diner and its menu, I posit that, through culture jamming and

alternative approaches to use, we might break free from a menu of social of options, redefining the purpose of the diner as a site for sharing a variety of tastes. In other words, we might “uncool” the spectacle of social media, returning it to a weird yet hungry and fatigued social collective.

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## About the Author



Andrew Houldcroft, also known as Andy, is a senior majoring in Communication Studies with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. He researches topics of subjectivity and online identity as they relate to social powers. He wrote this essay with the guidance of Dr. Maria Hegbloom (Communication Studies) and presented it at the Eastern Communication Association 2016 conference in Baltimore, MD, funded by BSU's Undergraduate Research Conference Travel Grant. Andy intends to pursue graduate school to study digital communications. He hopes to provide meaningful dialogue on the impact of online visibility and culture as it reflects previous theorizations.