Usability News

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Usability News is a free web newsletter that is produced by the Software Usability Research Laboratory (SURL) at Wichita State University. The SURL team specializes in software/website user interface design, usability testing, and research in human-computer interaction.
Barbara S. Chaparro, Editor

Facebook Sharing and Caring

Justin W. Owens

Summary. In the last issue of Usability News (13.1), we explored information (link) sharing among social groups. The current study expands on these results by examining how individuals share information through social networking, specifically Facebook. Participants were asked about what methods in Facebook they use to share, with whom they share, reasons for sharing, issues they may experience, and -other questions about sharing links through Facebook. Results show that videos were the dominant type of link shared, followed by photos and fun/humorous links when sharing through Facebook. Outside of Facebook, respondents tended to share news information instead of photos. Additionally, respondents in this study reported they shared information more frequently through Facebook than outside of Facebook indicating that Facebook is a primary communication tool. A majority of respondents (81%) indicated that they rarely customized shared link posts.

INTRODUCTION

Information sharing has been prevalent across several different types of media. Previously, Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011) examined sharing information across social circles. Social circles consist of individuals that are organized by different types of social capital. Social circles were divided into inner and outer social circles. Inner social circles are typically created with bonding social capital, while outer social circles are based on bridging social capital. The primary difference between bonding and bridging social capital is that bonding social capital provides emotional support whereas bridging social capital does not.

Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011) found that individuals shared most often with close family and friends in inner social circles and co-workers and classmates in outer social circles. Overall, 93% of those sampled shared with inner social circles, while 83% shared with outer social circles. The majority of those surveyed indicated they shared information via e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking. Of these methods, individuals tended to share via e-mail with their spouse/partner and close family and friends. While sharing through social networking was popular when sharing information with close family and friends, extended family and friends, and the public. News articles, fun or humorous links, and general information were the most popular types of information shared regardless of social circles. There were some differences in the types of information shared between circles, with photos and product information more likely to be shared with one's parents than a spouse/partner or close family/friend. Similarly, in outer circles, school information was shared most

commonly with their boss/teacher/professor.

Individuals typically shared for benevolent reasons (Owens, Shaikh, & Chaparro, 2011). Primarily, they thought the recipients would be interested, the recipient would find it funny, or it was related to a hobby of the recipient. Moreover, they wanted to help or make the recipient smile. The most common issues reported when sharing with others were that they could not tell if the recipient benefited, did not receive feedback about the shared links, or could not track the how far the link was shared.

Social networking websites have become one of the largest platforms for communication on the Internet. In Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011), social networking was the 3rd most common method of sharing information overall and 2nd most common online method for facilitating sharing. In 2011, there were 800 million active users on Facebook (Facebook, 2011). According to a 2011 Pew Internet study, Facebook users tended to have more social support and be more trusting of individuals than general Internet users. Finally, individuals use the social networking services to maintain social ties or revive dormant relationships.

Purpose

This study follows the general sharing study "Patterns of Information Sharing Among Inner and Outer Social Circles" (Owens, Shaikh, & Chaparro, 2011). Since social networking has become an often-used facet for communication and maintaining social bonds, the current study explores sharing through social networking. The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals, especially college students, use social networking tools to share links to information. The types of information they share and with whom, why they share, and problems experienced while sharing are examined.

METHOD

Participants

Overall, 259 respondents (83 male, 176 female; *M* age = 24.84 years, *SD* = 9.62) responded to the survey. Males (*M* = 26.84 years, *SD* = 11.35) tended to be older than females (*M* = 23.90 years, *SD* = 8.56). The sample consisted of 203 full-time students, 18 part-time students, and 37 other individuals. Only 20.5% of respondents reported previously receiving a Bachelor's Degree or higher. Almost half of the respondents reported having some college education, while 26.3% reported only having a high school degree. Several respondents reported being only students (37.1%), however, 10% of all respondents reported working in the medical field and 8.5% reported their occupation as sales and marketing.

The majority of respondents reported owning a laptop (95.8%) or a smartphone with a touchscreen (56%). Only 42.5% reported owning a desktop. Few reported owning a smartphone without a touchscreen (10.8%) or a tablet (8.5%).

Respondents' Internet usage varied greatly. Most respondents used the Internet anywhere from 7 to 40 hours per week. Approximately 26.3% used the Internet 7-14 hours per week. Similarly, 25.9% and 27.4% used it from 15-24 hours and 25-40 hours per week, respectively. Respondents reported using the Internet for a wide variety of reasons. An overwhelming majority used it for e-mail (94.6%), education (90%), social networking (89.2%), and entertainment (84.6%). Few respondents used the Internet for instant messaging (32%), blogging (11.2%), or microblogging (11.2%). Almost all respondents (94.6%) reported using Facebook. A little over half reported using Google+.

Materials

A 53-question survey about link sharing behavior over social networking websites was used to collect sharing data from respondents. The survey asked questions about demographics, general sharing behavior, and specific sharing behavior over Facebook. Respondents answered either 23 or 53 questions depending on whether they had a Facebook account. Items used in this study were a variety of single-select, multi-select, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

Procedure

The survey was posted to Wichita State University's experimental management system, Facebook, Google+, and SURL's *Usability News*. Student participation was compensated through course credit. Responses from respondents were collected from August to October 2011.

RESULTS

Respondents were asked several questions regarding their sharing behavior. A person that shares was defined as someone that shared links, such as links to news, product information, music, etc. with another individual. Out of 259 respondents, 95.8% reported they shared at least one type of information outside of Facebook. Some respondents reported not having a Facebook account (n = 14). Of those that have Facebook accounts, 88.8% stated they shared links to various types of information on the popular social network. Respondents were also asked how often they shared with different groups of people through Facebook (e.g., family, classmates). Sharing ranged from several times a day to never sharing with that group of individuals. The different groups were examined individually and within social circles. Social circles were defined as inner and outer social circles. Inner circles consisted of spouse/partner, parents, and close family/friends. Outer circles consisted of bosses/teachers/professors, co-workers/classmates, and extended family/friends. More respondents shared with inner circles than outer circles (82.9% vs. 76.7%). See Figure 1 for more information.

When respondents share with their inner social circle, more respondents shared with their close family and friends than their spouse/partner or parents. When sharing with their outer social circle, more respondents shared with their co-workers/classmates than extended family/friends or their boss/teacher/professor. Slightly under half of respondents (48.2%) said they shared with the public through Facebook, where the public is defined as being anyone on Facebook being allowed to see what the participant shared.

How often individuals shared with different groups was examined. A Friedman's x^2 was conducted to examine differences in sharing behavior. Across all groups, differences in how often they shared was significant, x^2 (6) = 378.066, p < .001. See Table 1 for mean ranks. Post hoc tests revealed respondents tend to share more often with close family/friends than any other group. They also share more often with co-workers/classmates, extended family/friends, and the public than their spouse/partner, parents, and their boss/teacher/professors.

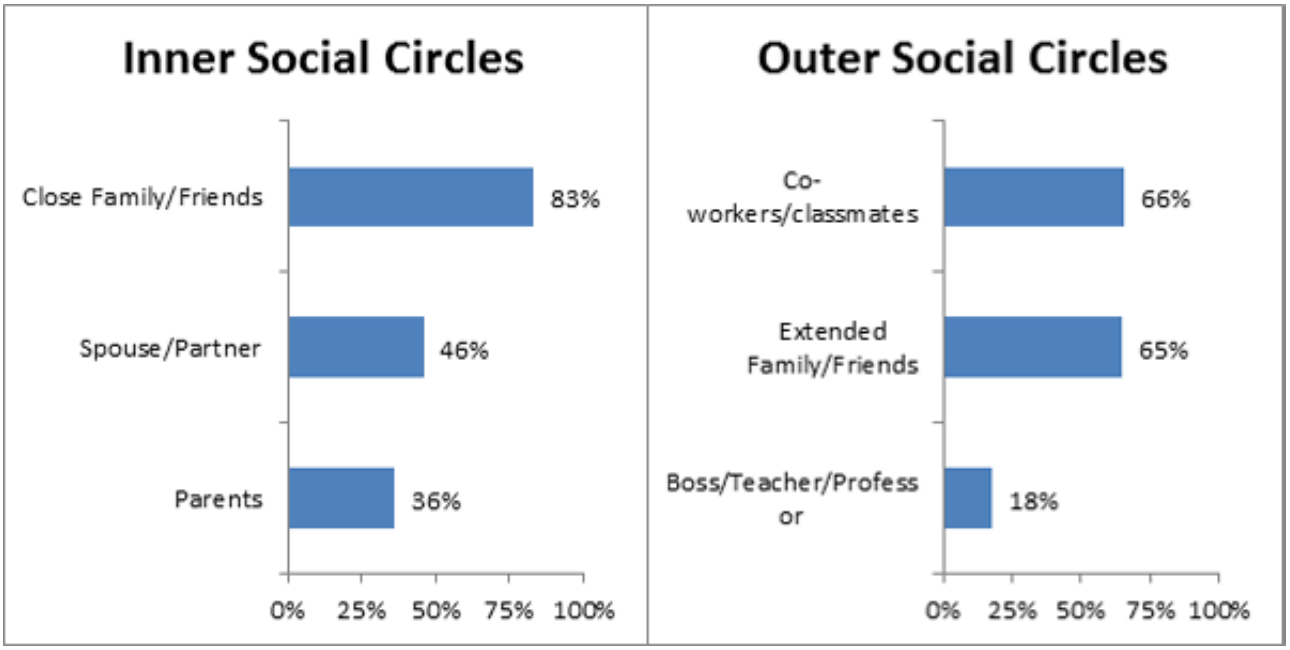

Figure 1. Percentages of respondents sharing to groups within different social circles through Facebook.

Table 1. Mean ranks for how often individuals share with different groups. Lower rank indicates more sharing.

Group	Mean Rank
Spouse/Partner	4.16
Parents	4.84
Close Family/Friends	2.55
Extended Family/Friends	3.59
Boss/Teacher/Professor	5.38
Co-Workers/Classmates	3.46
Public	4.02

What types of information are being shared?

The majority of respondents reported sharing several different types of information through Facebook (see Figure 2). Most commonly, respondents shared videos (70%), photos (67%), fun/humor (66%), music (60%), hobbies (57%), news articles (57%), or general information (57%). Of those respondents, fewer (34% - 47%) reported sharing school/research information, local information, or sports. Less than a third of respondents reported sharing products, books, or recipes.

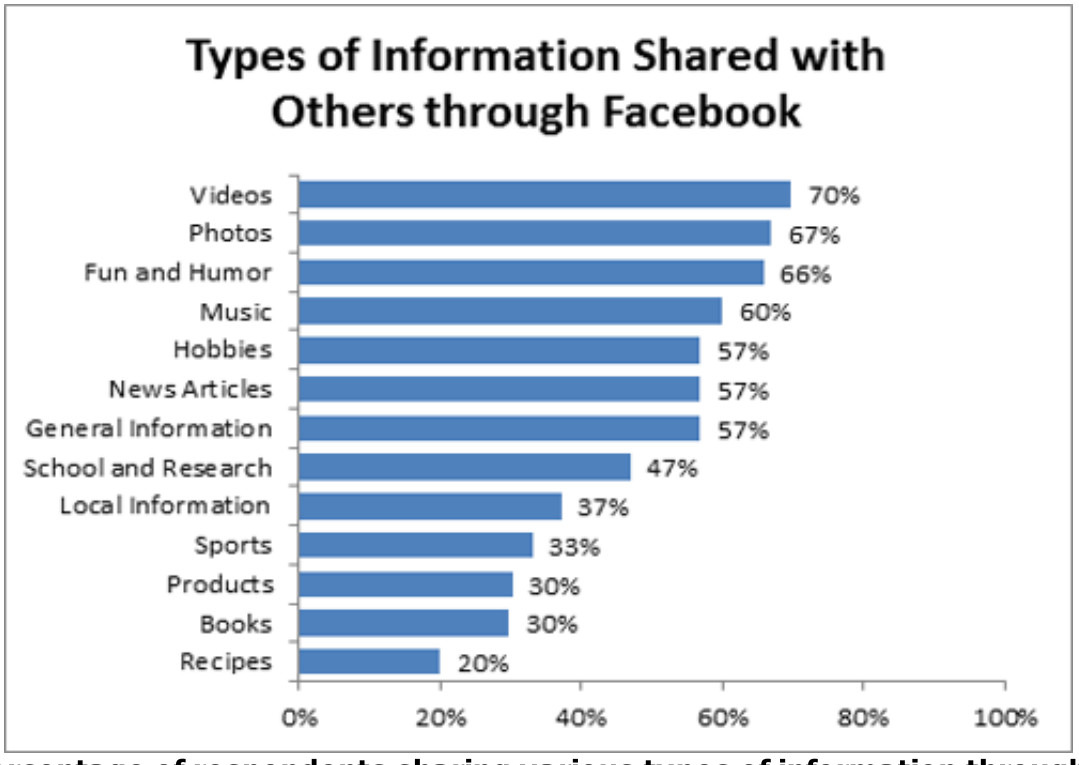

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents sharing various types of information through Facebook.

Respondents were also asked what information they shared outside of Facebook (see Figure 3). They reported they were most likely to share videos (59%), fun/humor (55%), news articles (55%), music

(51%), or photos (51%). Fewer respondents stated they shared school/research information (41%), general information (39%), or hobbies (38%). Less than a third stated they shared products, local information, sports, books, or recipes.

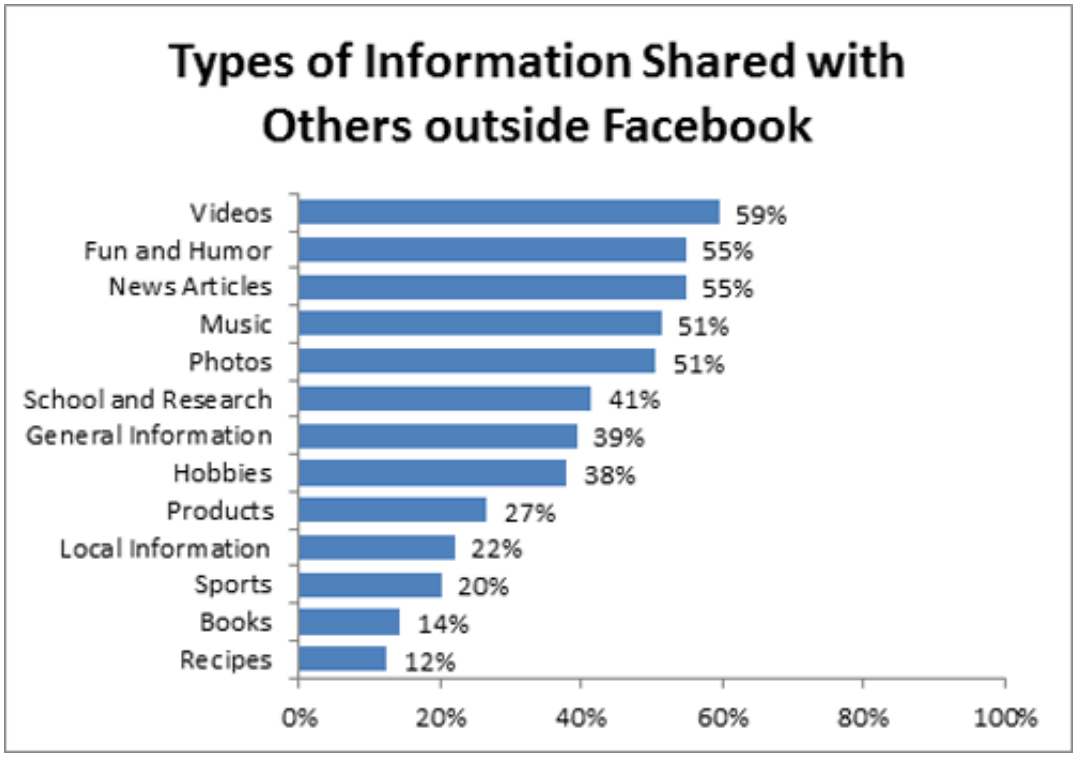

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents sharing various types of information outside Facebook.

Sharing through and outside of Facebook were compared. McNemar's tests were conducted to determine differences in sharing inside and outside Facebook. Generally, more respondents shared information through Facebook for 10 of 13 categories, $p < .05$ (See Table 2 for more information). They shared similarly on and off Facebook for school/research information, news articles, and product information.

Information Type	Through Facebook	Outside Facebook	x^2	Significance
Videos	171	154	7.446	< .01
Fun/Humorous	161	142	9.851	< .01
News Articles	139	142	0.145	.703
Music	147	133	5.823	< .05
Photos	164	131	18.107	< .001
School and Research	115	107	3.015	.082
General Information	139	102	19.959	< .001
Hobbies	139	98	28.321	< .001
Product Information	74	69	.901	.342
Local Information	91	57	18.753	< .001
Sports	81	52	18.367	< .001

~~**Books**~~	~~73~~	~~37~~	~~23.672~~	~~< .001~~
Recipes	49	32	9.031	< .01

What features are used to share?

Respondents were asked whether they shared information through their Facebook walls with default settings, customized settings, or through messages. Overall, more respondents indicated they shared through messages than through their wall (see Figure 4). A Friedman's x^2 was conducted to examine differences in how often the features were used. Significant differences in how often they utilized features was significant, x^2 (2) = 17.815, p < .001, W = .036. Respondents posted links in messages or through walls with default settings more often than sharing with wall customization. However, while these features were used more often, there was a low degree of agreement in how often these features were used.

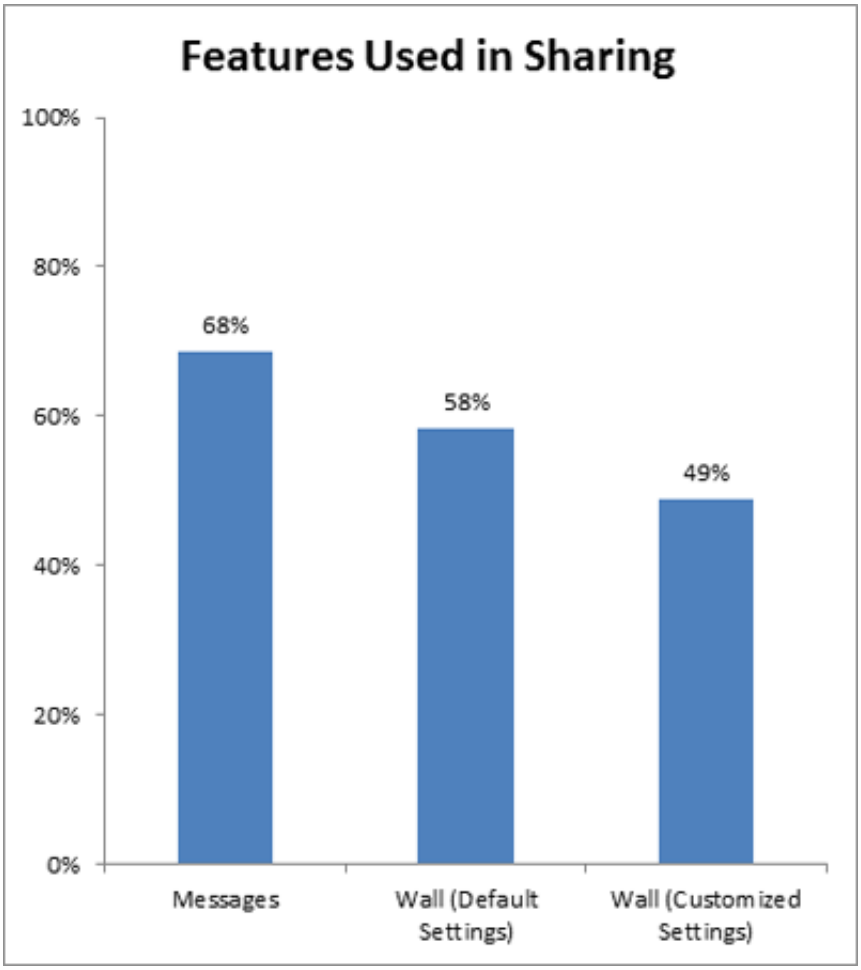

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents using the different Facebook sharing features.

Why do people share through Facebook?

Respondents were asked what reasons they share through Facebook (see Figure 5). Primarily, respondents shared for some benefit to others. Most commonly, they thought the recipient might be interested (78%), wanted the recipient to smile (71%), thought the recipient would think it was funny (66%), thought it might be useful for a hobby (56%), or they wanted to be helpful (47%). Smaller groups of respondents wanted to show enthusiasm (43%) or seeking input/feedback (38%). Collaborative reasons, like discussion (39%), planning events (30%), collaborating for taking a trip

(19%), building a community (18%), or purchasing gifts for a mutual person (11%) were given less frequently. Only 27% shared to show dissatisfaction and 20% shared to provoke a challenge from others.

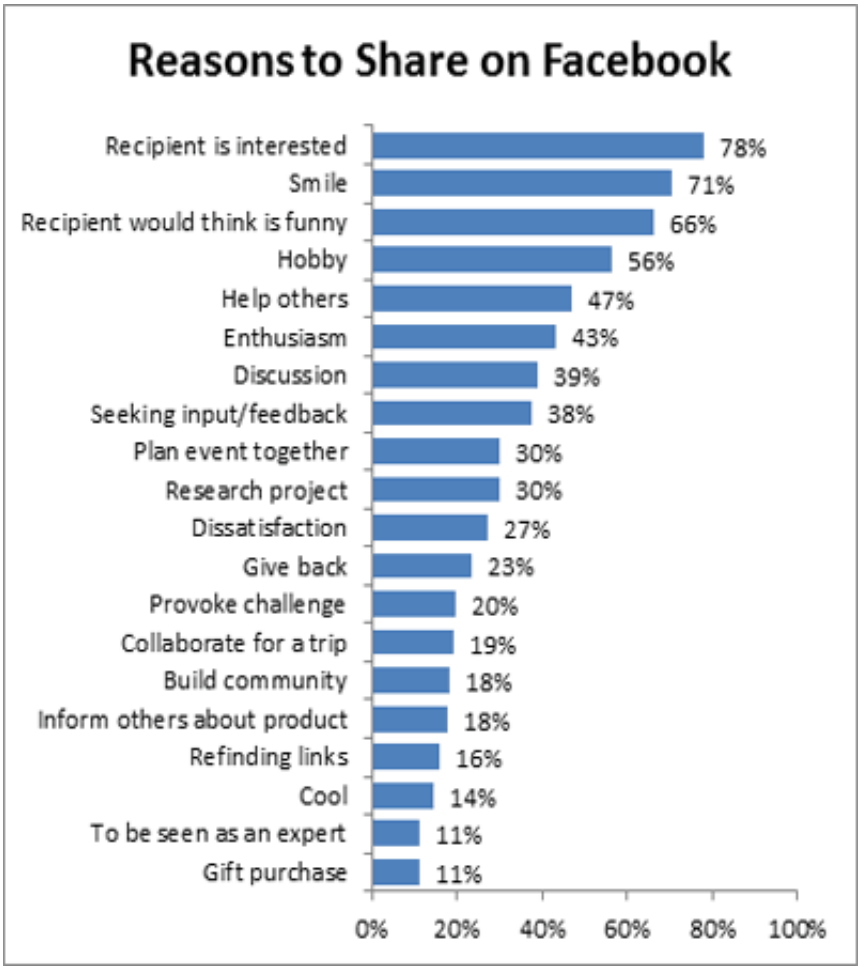

Figure 5. Percentage of the various reasons why the respondents share over Facebook.

What issues are experienced by those that share through Facebook?

Respondents were asked what issues they experienced while sharing over Facebook (see Figure 6). Thirty-seven percent reported they had no issues sharing (see green bar in Figure 6). The most common issues experienced were that they did not know if the recipient(s) had seen the link previously (38%) or if they recipient(s) would benefit (31%). Additionally, receiving feedback (29%) and tracking reach (24%) were also among the more commonly noted issues.

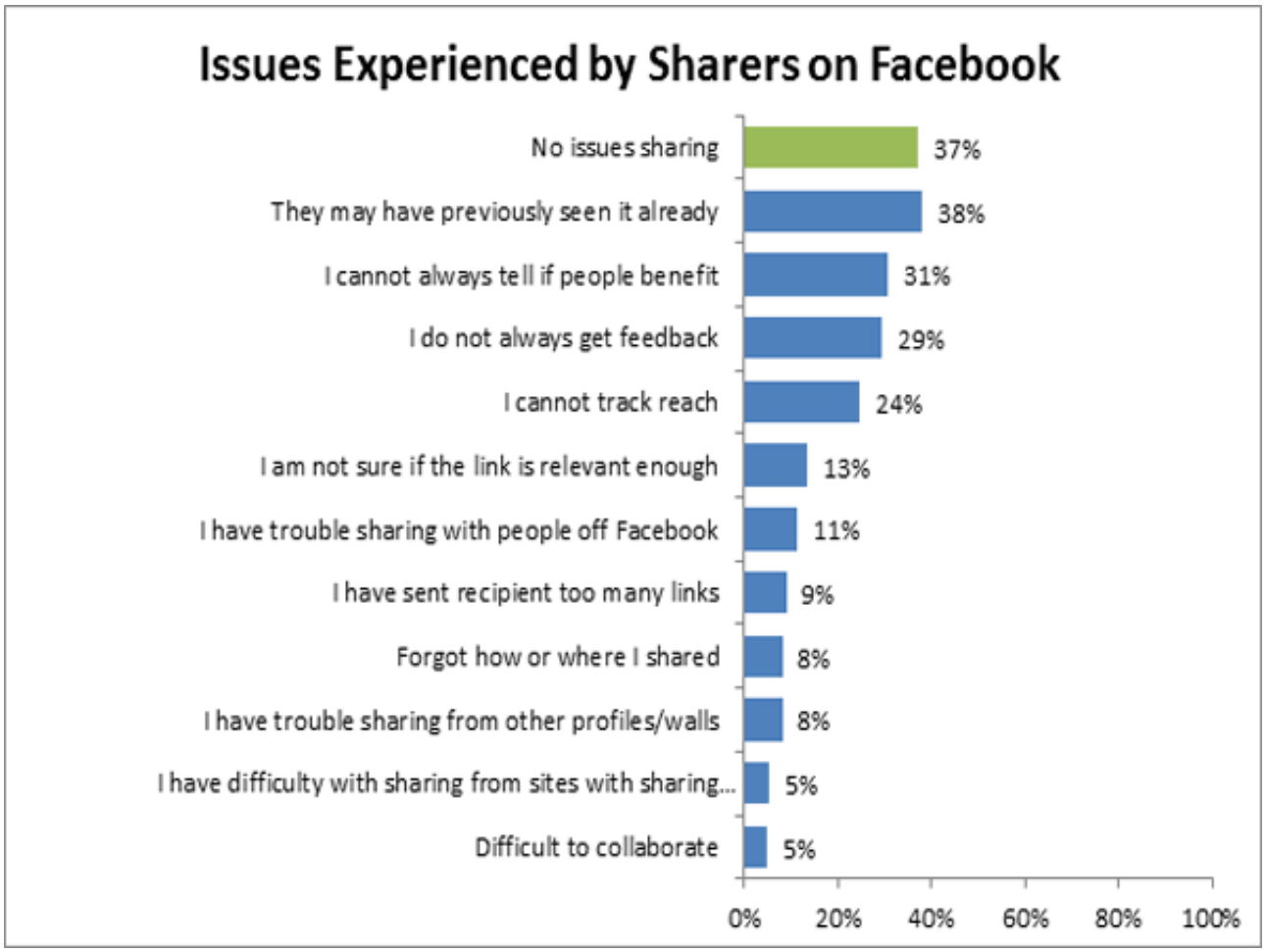

Figure 6. Percentage of issues experienced by sharers on Facebook.

How do sharers handle those that overshare or share poor links?

Respondents were asked how they contend with other sharers that share too many links or poor quality links. They were asked if they just scroll past them in their newsfeed, hide them from their newsfeed, or defriend them (see Figure 7). Generally, regardless of sharing poorly or too much, sharers will scroll past the offending links instead of defriending or hiding. In this question, the Likert scale was 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree, which allowed respondents to take a neutral stance on the issue. When asked about hiding those that share poor quality links or too many links, sharers tended to be neutral for both types of offenses, $p > .05$. Finally, respondents had a tendency not to defriend over both types of sharing offenses.

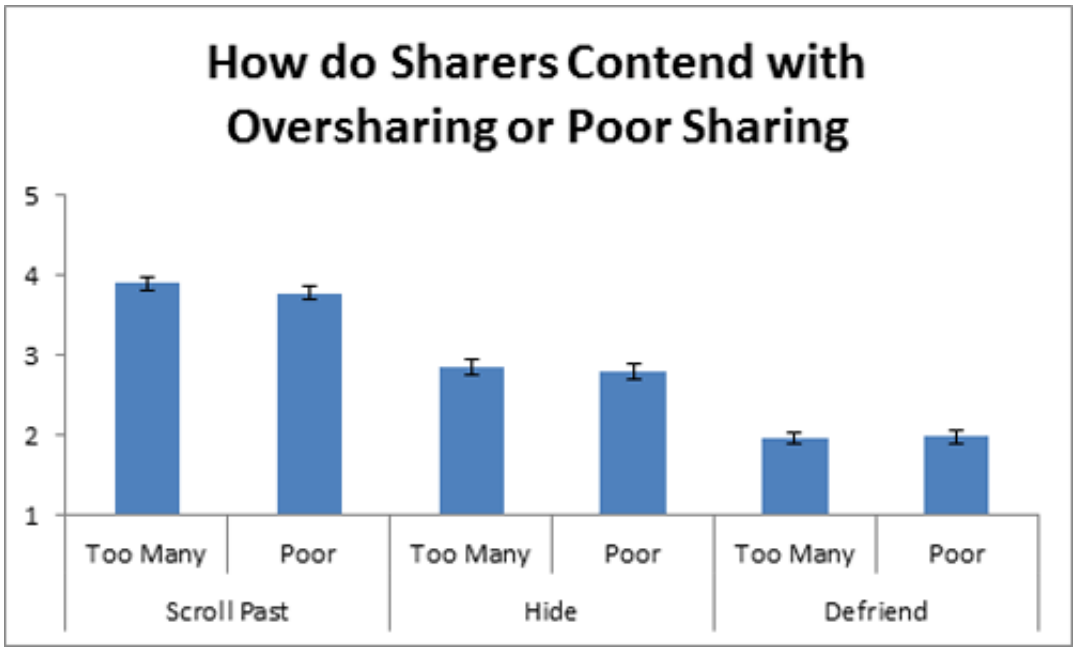

Figure 7. Ways people contend with oversharing or sharing poor quality links.
Note: Error bars represent +/- one standard error. Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree

Resharing

Respondents were asked a series of Likert scale questions about how they felt with others resharing links they have shared through different Facebook features. The question they were asked was "I often want others to reshare links/URLs that I shared through these Facebook features." They were given several options including their own wall, with and without customization, another person's wall, chat, and groups. Generally, respondents had a tendency to not want others to reshare links posted, more so with links shared through their walls with customized sharing settings and chat/messaging. See Figure 8 for more information.

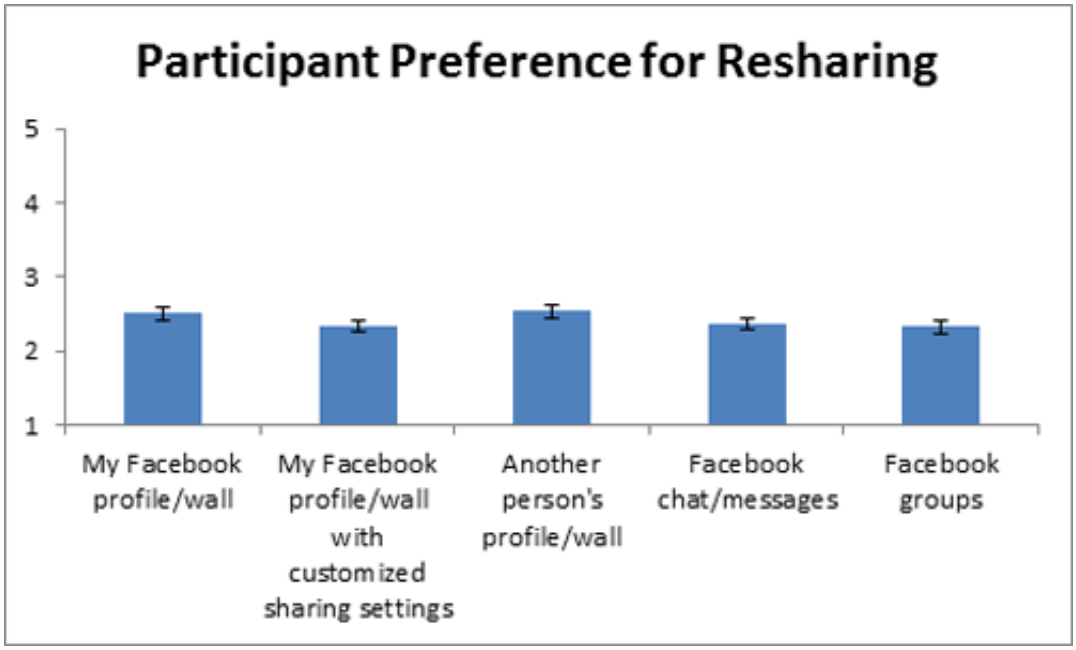

Figure 8. Resharing preferences based on Facebook features.
Note: Error bars represent +/- one standard error. Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree

Liking Shared Links

Respondents were asked if they "Like" links they enjoy on Facebook and if they anticipate others "Liking" the links they share through Facebook. Overall, they tended to "Like" links they have enjoyed and anticipated others "Liking" links they have shared (see Figure 9). However, they anticipated others liking their links less strongly. Respondents were also asked how often they use the "recommend" feature on other websites to post links to their own profiles. Approximately 44% do not use this feature and of those that do, they tended to use it less than once a day. See Figure 10 for frequency of usage.

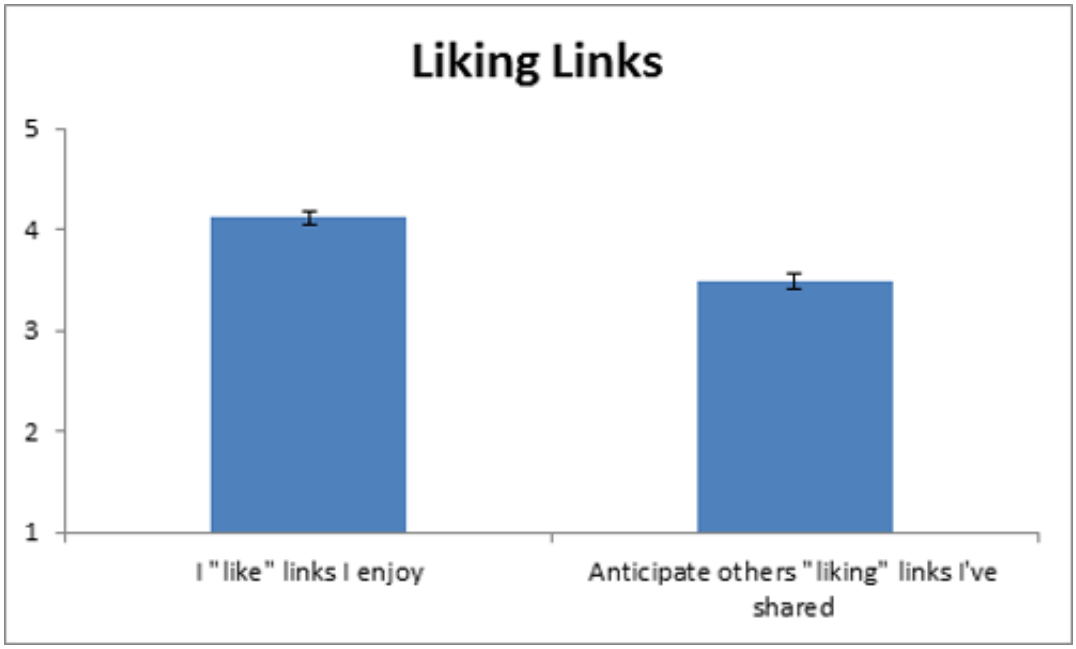

Figure 9. Participant views about liking actions.
Note: Error bars represent +/- one standard error. Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree

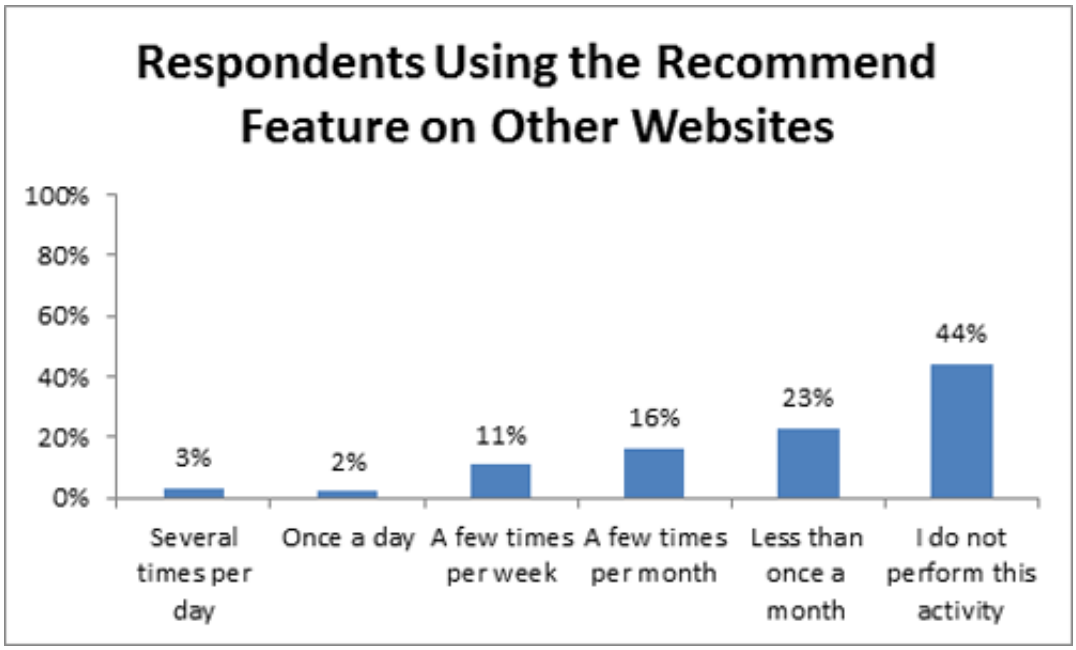

Figure 10. Percentage of respondents using the "recommend" feature.

Tracking Reach and Resharing

Respondents were asked about their preferences towards wanting to know who has read their links and how often others have reshared those links. Respondents were mostly indifferent about wanting to know who has read and who has reshared their links (see Figure 11). However, they tended to agree that Facebook did not provide enough information about who has read and reshared, more so about who looked at their links.

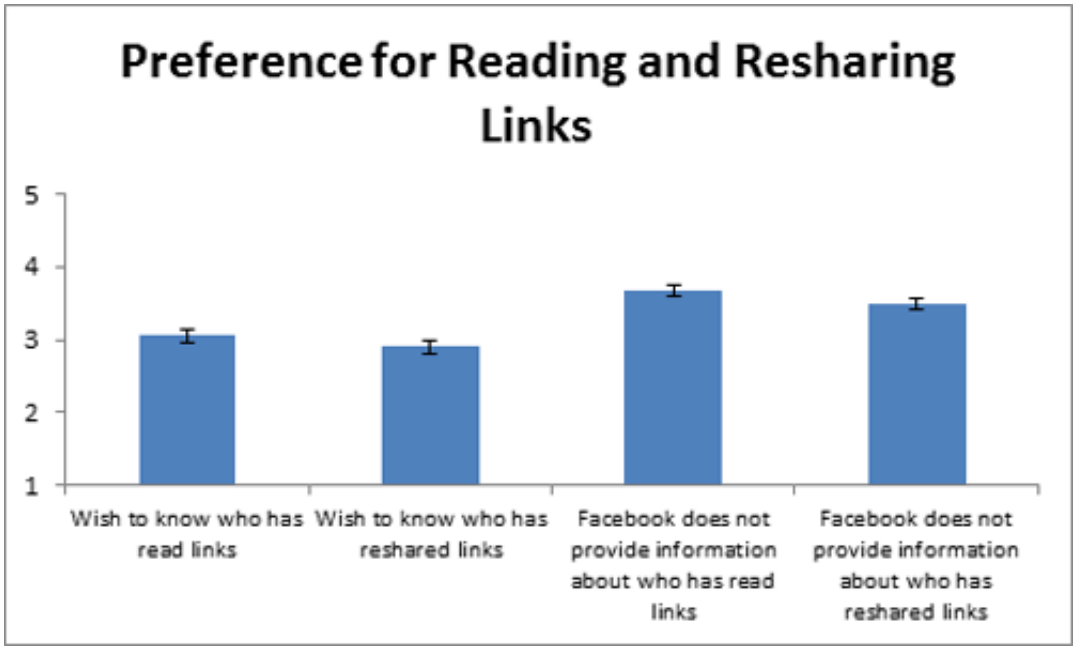

Figure 11. Average rating regarding preferences for feedback from shared links. Note: Error bars represent +/- one standard error. Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree

Sharing Settings

Respondents were asked about their default sharing settings and how often they customized posts when sharing links (see Figures 12 and 13). The majority of respondents reported their default sharing settings for posting updates was set to "Friends Only" (58%). Relatively few respondents used customized settings as their default group (8%). When respondents were asked how often they do customize sharing, the majority stated they do not customize, but instead use their default sharing settings (56%). Approximately 25% of respondents customized some posts, while more frequent customization, half of their postings or greater, occurred less often (> 20%).

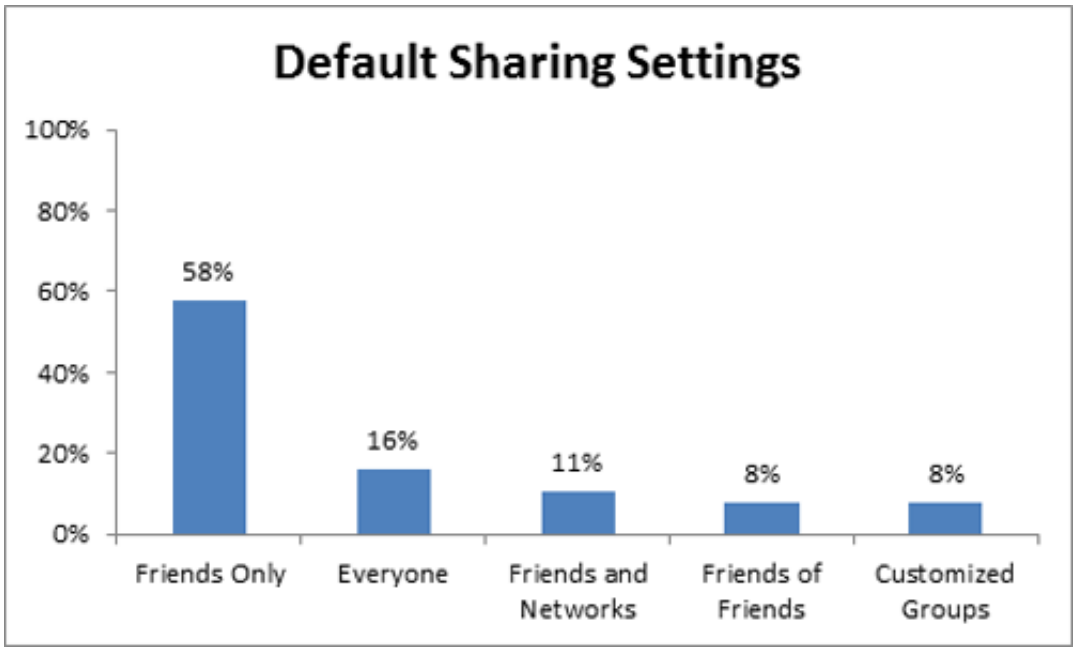

Figure 12. Default sharing percentages reported by respondents.

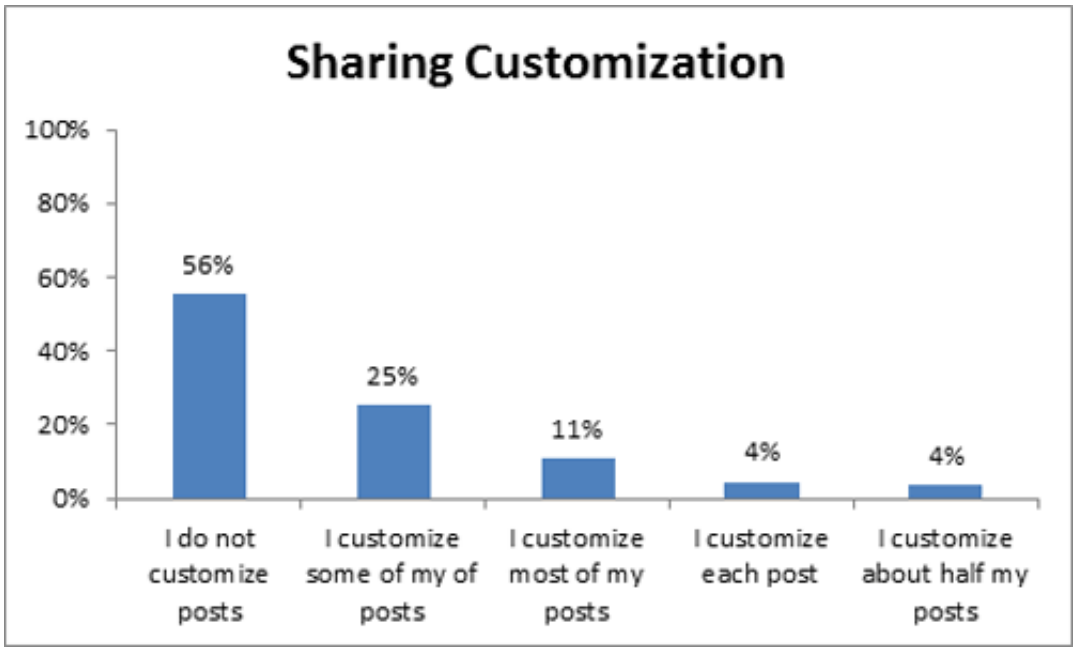

Figure 13. Percentage of respondents that customize sharing.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that individuals do share a variety of information through Facebook with several different groups. Respondents in this study shared similarly to those in the Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011) study, where more shared with inner than outer social circles. When comparing sharing within inner social circles, in both studies, close family/friends were shared with the most, followed by their spouse/partner, and parents. Sharing with parents and spouse/partner decreased when compared with sharing in the general sharing study. In outer social circles, sharing with groups differed. Sharing with extended family/friends was relatively higher than in the general sharing study, while sharing with bosses/teachers/professors decreased. It is very probable that differences in these sharing patterns reflect the higher percentage of college age

students in this study whereas the general sharing study had more of an even mixture of college students and professionals.

The types of information shared with others in this study differed from the original Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011) study. In the current study, music replaced general information as one of the most popular types of information shared. Additionally, videos were the dominant type of link shared, followed by photos and fun/humorous links when sharing through Facebook. Outside of Facebook, respondents tended to share news information instead of photos. Taken together, this implies that the sample tended to share for entertainment and leisure more than what was found in the general sharing study, but shared news outside of Facebook. Additionally, respondents in this study reported they shared information more frequently through Facebook than outside of Facebook indicating that Facebook is a primary communication tool.

When sharing information through Facebook, respondents tended to use messaging over sharing through their wall, regardless of sharing customization. This is indicative of more targeted sharing since messaging typically involves one or a few other people. When respondents did share through their walls, they typically chose to share with their default settings. When asked about how often they shared with customized settings, 81% said they never customized or only customized some of the shared link posts. This suggests they are happy either with their default settings (mostly "Friends only"), exhibiting a status quo bias, or thought the link did not bear the importance for customization.

Generally, respondents showed a slight tendency to prefer for others not to reshare information they have posted. This slight tendency was more dominant when more targeted, or private sharing occurred through customization or messaging. If the link was posted to a wall or another person's wall, respondents were slightly more positive about resharing. Respondents did not show a positive or negative preference about wanting to know who has read and reshared the links, but still thought that Facebook did not provide enough information about who has read the links.

In the current study and the general sharing study by Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011), the top reasons and issues with sharing were very similar. Generally, respondents shared to benefit others instead of for negative reasons. They also stated that their biggest issues were that they could not tell whether recipients benefited, they did not receive feedback, and that they could not track reach. While several of the same issues were noted, fewer respondents reported these as being issues in the current study. One issue not previously inquired about, which was reported as an issue for social networkers, was that they were unsure if the recipient(s) had previously seen the links before. The current Facebook interface likely provides a solution for determining who benefited by "liking" the link, but it may not be utilized as often as one would hope. Additionally, the current interface provides information about who has reshared links, which would likely address some concern with determining reach of information. However, the current interface does not address who has read it and it would be doubtful this information would be provided, if only for privacy concerns. However, summative information may be provided instead.

The final important issue noted where they were unsure if the link had previously been seen may be addressed by providing some information about whether mutual friends had previously shared the link before posting. Respondents had the same response for when others share too many or poor quality links. If the respondents thought another person overshared or shared poor links, they tended to scroll past the offending post. While they were neutral about hiding sharers that overshare or share poor quality links, these are a much milder consequences than defriending others over such offenses. Currently, Facebook creates summary content based on several types of links shared through the service. It may be beneficial to allow hiding of types of information on one's own newsfeed, which may decrease the likelihood of someone being completely hidden due to sharing poor or too many links. An example of this utility is already in place through the ability to hide application, which it seems it could be extended to include videos or other types of known postings.

Respondents tended to "Like" links they found enjoyable and they had an expectation of others liking the links they posted to various locations in Facebook. However, their expectation of others liking their links was still preferred, but not as strongly as their own "liking" behavior. A little more than half

of the respondents reported that they use the "recommend" feature found on many websites.

Overall, individuals in this study exhibited similar sharing patterns as those in Owens, Shaikh, and Chaparro (2011) with the exception of a few areas such as those pertaining to school and a tendency to share more leisure or entertainment information through Facebook. Findings of this study suggest that Facebook is a viable platform through which to share, and given its popularity, sharers are capable of reaching their targeted audiences.

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