Anthropology Senior Theses

Department of Anthropology

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Facebook Trends: Understanding Intangible Cultural Ties Through a Virtual Community

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Facebook Trends: Understanding Intagible Cultural Ties Through a Virtual Community

Disciplines

Anthropology

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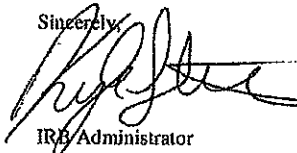You will be sent a notice of expiration for this proposal before 18-Mar-2011.

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Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

FACEBOOK TRENDS:
UNDERSTANDING INTAGIBLE CULTURAL TIES
THROUGH A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

By

Jessica Palay

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the
Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Louise Krasniewicz

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Abstract

Community is an important component to human life, creating the social bonds

necessary for society to function. Yet communities come in many shapes and forms.

With the advent of technology, virtual social networking sites have gained in popularity,

such as Facebook. The question becomes, is Facebook a community and if so, is it the

same as a physical community? To answer this, the theory of gift giving as a way of

forming social bonds and therefore communities was employed to determine if such

things occurred on Facebook. Three different forms of exchange were examined: gift

giving, poking and wall writing. Through interviews and observation, the data suggests

that these virtual behaviors acted on the same principles of reciprocity exhibited in

physical communities. Thus, Facebook is a community as much as a small town in

Indiana is. Despite changes in technology, human behavior essentially remains the same.

Jessica Palay

Thesis
Facebook Trends:
Understanding intangible cultural ties through a virtual community

Introduction

Humans are social animals. As such, we form communities in which we live our lives and interact with others. Yet, what exactly defines a community? This question has consumed anthropologists for decades as they have observed group behavior. By entering into specific social groups and observing from the inside, they have tried to understand what makes a community. Since the late 1800s, the beginning of academic anthropology, anthropologists have studied societies in attempt to understand how different communities work (Barrett 1984:4). As Richard Barrett explains, "When an anthropologist writes about a people, it is with the assuredness that comes with intimate association" (1984:3). From these close observations, anthropologists have defined and continue to define what formulates a community.

A community, first and foremost, is defined by its own self perception. Anderson Benedict explicates, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991:6). Communities exist because their members recognize them as an entity. They therefore must be evaluated in their own terms. The physical community cannot exist without the cultural meanings within the members' heads. Community, or social capital, as Robert Putnam calls it interchangeably, has to do with social connections (2000:21). To him, social capital consists of the amount and types of relationships that one has with others; how one creates networks. These networks are based on reciprocity; for the "norm of generalized reciprocity is so fundamental to civilized life that all prominent moral codes

contain some equivalent of the Golden Rule" (2000:135). The idea to do unto others as you would have them do unto you is the cornerstone of building a community. Since social ties outline the bonds of a community, it is important to maintain healthy relationships.

Community and the Modern World

Community is a loaded term. While it implies a group of people bonded together by a common denominator, it allows for a plethora of definitions and groupings. Traditionally, a community defined itself by locality and interactions between people within a distinct physical space. With the advent of technology, however, this has started to change. Air travel enables people to traverse the globe in hours while cell phones and email make communication instantaneous and readily available. The internet, in particular, has shaped this transformation. In today's terms, it means that a person can belong to multiple communities: by location, education, religion, hobbies, lifestyles and more. Electronic mail, instant messaging, online phone services like Skype and networking sites provide venues to make and maintain connections. Networking sites are the most noteworthy in their attempt to create communities outside the physical sphere, creating a virtual space for people to interact. A lot of attention has been paid to these webpages, sparking debates over the "authenticity" of such sites: are they truly a community or simply a substitute for the physical ones that people live in?

Whether replacing one's physical community with a virtual one is socially healthy or not, websites such as MySpace and Facebook have been gaining in popularity in terms of both users and media attention. Facebook especially commands much attention through its membership growth and constant innovation. But while the media focuses on

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its profitability and amazes over its popularity, the mechanisms behind Facebook's success has not been properly studied. The question becomes not what makes Facebook so successful but why? From an anthropological perspective, this means determining whether Facebook is a community. That is, does it represent and encompass its own unique and sustainable community? And if so, is it the same as a physical community?

Many different elements come together to form a functioning community: a prevailing social structure, division of labor, forms of communication and prescribed modes of relationships. More recently overlooked is the role of gift-giving and reciprocity in creating and maintaining social bonds. As our society shifts toward a more virtual world, such practices should move as well. While traditional exchange involves the passing of tangible objects from one to the other, anthropological theory has long contended that it is the invisible meanings, obligations and associations attached to the gift that create relationships. The classic example of lending a neighbor a cup of sugar illustrates this point. While one gives the sugar freely, it is implied that at some point, the neighbor will lend you something in return. On Facebook, pixels, gestures and words are exchanged, which possibly carries the same meanings that a cup of sugar does. Three options on Facebook will be used to explore this idea: gift giving, poking and wall writing. I hope to prove that each of these actions is done with specific social intentions and requires some sort of response on behalf of the recipient.

So is Facebook just as real of a community as a small African village? By studying the role of reciprocity on Facebook, I hope to determine whether it exhibits the same sorts of exchange in the virtual world as found in the physical.

The Gift: The Theory Behind It

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The theory of gift-giving was codified by Marcel Mauss in his 1925 work, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.* While he focused on reciprocity in archaic societies, his ideas can be applied to behaviors exhibited on today. In applying it to his own time, he writes that, "The theme of the gift, of freedom and obligation in the gift, of generosity and self-interest in giving, reappear in our own society like the resurrection of a dominant motif long forgotten" (Mauss 1967:66). This idea again today has been overlooked despite its significance to community-building. Commonly used in social interactions, its frequent employment numbs people from realizing its importance. That is why it is crucial to highlight how it functions in society today. Yet before delving too deep, it is important to understand Mauss' theory and how it works to explain social interactions.

On the surface, giving a gift serves little practical purpose. It is costly, both in time and resources, and warrants no immediate return or benefit to the donor. Despite this, gift giving occurs across time and culture from the ancient Greeks' *xenia* (hospitality) to an American child's birthday party. In studying culture, there are few things that all societies have in common. The prevalence of gift exchange thus makes it a noteworthy occurrence. This seemingly pointless action therefore must have some underlying principle or it would not exist universally. As Mauss comments, "In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation" (1967:1). The key to these types of exchange is that it creates a sense of indebtedness in the recipient towards the giver. Essentially, the invisible strings attached to the object give the gift its social consequence.

Unlike most exchanges, gifts do not have to be reciprocated immediately. For example, a friend might give another friend a birthday card. This seemingly altruistic gesture, while not pressing, does require an appropriate response: a return card on the donor's birthday. Mauss explains, "The other characteristic shows the danger of receiving the pledge. For it is not only the person who gives it that is bound, but also the one who receives it" (1967:61). In this way, gift exchange is active on both ends in terms of social meaning. The beneficiary appears to be the passive one in the deed but by accepting the gift, he becomes an active part of the social web. Thus both the giving *and* receiving of gifts work to solidify the relationship between the two participants.

The relationship formed between the donor and the recipient varies based on the nature of the gift. It can show social superiority placing the receiver as the giver's subordinate if the gift is greater than the receiver can repay. In addition, it can be an exchange among equals (i.e. birthday cards)—or by refusing to accept a gift or failing to reciprocate—an insult. These actions live in the intangible; Mauss puts it best when he says, "Much of our everyday morality is concerned with the question of obligation and spontaneity in the gift . . . Things have values which are emotional as well as material; indeed in some cases the values are entirely emotional" (1967:63). When examining Facebook, it is the emotional meaning behind these exchanges that hold its significance.

Beyond Mauss: A Modern Look At An Old Theory
Since Mauss debuted his theory, others have added important insights to the concept of gift-giving. While this paper will mainly focus on Mauss' original thoughts, an overview of more modern thinking will be provided. Claude Levi-Strauss, the father of structuralism, presents a well thought-out commentary on Mauss' theory in his

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Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss. In explaining the symbolic nature of gift exchange he writes, "So no society is ever wholly and completely symbolic, that is because a society is always a spatial-temporal give, and therefore subject to the impact of other societies and earlier states of its own development" (1987:17). Each society builds on the next—thus new meanings are tied to previous ones. Its novel form rests on the foundation of conventional society.

Like Mauss, Levi-Strauss focuses on the symbolic nature of gifts. The relationship building attribute to exchange fascinated him. He asks, rhetorically, "Does this property exist objectively, like a physical property of the exchanged goods? Obviously not. That would in any case be impossible, since the goods in question are not only physical objects, but also dignities, responsibilities, privileges—whose sociological role is nonetheless the same as that of material goods" (1987:46). According to Levi –Strauss, the social components of the action as just as real as the transfer of the physical goods. Culture not only encompasses the objects created and used by a group but also the ideas behind the objects; how its made, its use, its disposal, etc. Therefore gifts contain more than their physical dimensions, they carry additional meaning.

Since Levi-Strauss, others have also looked at gift-giving in social contexts; their ideas will be highlighted as this paper unfolds. But like his idea that no society can develop independently of others, these later thinkers all built upon the revolutionary ideas of Mauss and Levi-Strauss.

What is Facebook?
Facebook is one of many social networking sites. While originally created for college students, is now open to anyone who has an email account. Its purpose is to

connect people. According to the site, "Facebook is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. People use Facebook to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet." This social utility, as it is stated, is used to enhance local relationships and maintain existing ones (especially over long distances).

To enter Facebook, users go to www.facebook.com. Once on the Welcome to Facebook page, members log in by typing in their email address and password (Figure 1). Users become members by signing up with a specific network (or none at all) and creating a password which must be typed in order to access the site. These networks can be schools, companies, cities and countries. Once a member, the user can create a profile (Figure 2) describing their interests, put up a picture, and "friend" other people (Figure 3). Users' friends show up on the left-hand side of the profile page. Friending a person gives a user access to their profile if the friend is on another network or has restricted his or her profile to only friends. It also usually recognizes a friendship that exists outside of the website.

In addition to making friends, Facebook has a multitude of applications that allow for users to interact with one another. They have become increasingly complex with features including popular games like Oregon Trail and the ability to upload photos and "tag" people in them which link the photos to their profiles. Users can also send private messages to one another by clicking the "Send [name] a message" button located below the person's picture. These messages show up in the user's inbox which can be accessed by clicking on the Inbox button at the top of the screen. They can also create or join groups. These groups show up on the user's profile and can represent political interests,

inside jokes, and physical groups like community service trips. By clicking on the name of a user's group, one is taken to the group homepage which can feature links, pictures and discussions. In these ways, Facebook allows users to forge their own identities and create/display social bonds.

There are also many public forms of exchange. Members can give gifts to their friends. To do that, the user visits the gift shop page where they can chose from hundreds of gifts (Figure 4). Availability fluctuates in minutes: one click said 467 gifts options were available, a click a moment later only 371 options were. After selecting the icon, the recipient's name is typed in and a message can be included. The icon and message then shows up on the recipient's profile (Figure 5). Another application is called poking. Essentially, when a user views someone's profile, they have the option to click on a button that says, "Poke [name]." When that person next logs onto Facebook, on the left hand side of their homepage, it will tell them who poked them and give them the option of poking back or ignoring it (Figure 6). In addition, wall writing is a popular feature. This application allows people to post messages on a user's wall. The wall is located on the user's profile page below the rest of his or her information (Figure 7). Along with the message, the writer's picture is shown beside it. While there are many other options available to users, these three features are the applications that will be examined in this study.

History of Facebook

Facebook, for all its social significance, is relatively young. Its brief history attests to the power of preexisting social networks and the ease of communication brought about by the internet. Understanding the history of the theory of gift-giving only

clarifies one half of my contention. By studying the history of Facebook, its impact can be better appreciated.

Founded in February of 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes in their Harvard dorm room, Facebook now has over 70 million active users according to the site. As it has grown in membership, it has also grown in applications. Facebook started off a lot simpler in nature. The wall writing feature was not added until September of 2004. By December of that year, Facebook reached one million users. In August of 2005, Facebook officially changed its name from www.thefacebook.com to Facebook, a term that it was already being referred by. From September 2005 to 2006, Facebook continually expanded opening up to high schools, international schools and workplaces, eventually becoming accessible to anyone who wants to join. This expansion of social networks allowed for Facebook to grow to 70 million active users today and, according to comScore, makes it the second most trafficked social networking site in the world after MySpace (2007). Its enormous popularity is what makes it such an intriguing source of study.

While wall writing was added soon after Facebook was developed, the gift shop feature began in February of 2007. An interesting thing to note is that poking does not appear on the development timeline or the application description sections of the site. Poking, as it will be discussed later, has a more ambiguous role in the Facebook world. These applications are some of the older forms of exchange found on Facebook. Because of this, they have had more time to become an ingrained part of the culture and therefore were chosen for examination. Since May 2007, Facebook has opened up to other applications developed outside of the company (www.facebook.com). In October 2007,

Microsoft bought a $240 million dollar stake in Facebook which valued the company at $15 billion (Vara 2008). This transaction represents the business sector's realization of the popularity and power of Facebook.

But while newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* are concerned with the potential profitability of Facebook, other publications, like *Wired Magazine* have looked at the more social aspects of the site. In this case, Scott Brown (2008) talks about the identities that people construct for themselves on Facebook versus one's real self. What he points out is through tracking sites such as Beacon, the real "you" is revealed. What he fails to note, is that in every society particular roles are played whether online or in the classroom. As Geertz explicates, "In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world, producing thus that idiosyncratic transformation in one's sense of reality" (13). Participation in exchange-driven activities on Facebook mirrors ritual action. Similarly, how one interacts with others on Facebook is telling of its social structure. By looking at forms of exchange on Facebook, I hope to prove that what is real on Facebook is also real in our physical communities.

Research Methods

All the subjects in the study were students enrolled at the same university. A mixture of years was used although most of the participants were in their final year. This was done because they had the most exposure to Facebook while being college students. In addition, they were the first generation of college students to have Facebook for all four years. It was about 50 percent female and 50 percent male from various groups who all interact in a general social scene. Although more social diversity could have lent

more insight, due to the limited scope of the project, the parameters had to be contained so a more cohesive conclusion could be drawn.

The subjects have all been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. In addition, everything posted on Facebook is public information put up by people who expect it to be read by others. Thus most of my information came from the public domain. Interviews were conducted similarly with all identifying information obscured. As a public forum, Facebook has implemented various levels of security to ensure that people can chose how public or private they want their information to be. But in all cases, the identities of the subjects have been protected.

Gift Application: How the Gift works in the virtual world

[Examples of gifts found on Facebook]

Gift-giving on Facebook is the most obvious example of exchange on the website. Created in February of 2007, they are designed by Susan Kare, the original developer of the Macintosh icons in 1983 (www.facebook.com). With hundreds of options to choose from, these pictures vary from hugging teddy bears, to a glass of beer, to piñatas. Giving a gift to someone else on Facebook involves buying an icon from the Facebook Gift Shop and posting it on the recipient's profile page. An optional message can be included along with the gift. This message can be made private and also anonymous so only the recipient can see that information. The message and giver appears with the icon under the recipient's gift section on his of her profile. Each gift costs the giver one dollar. Many gifts are limited edition which means once they are sold out; no more can be purchased

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making them more exclusive. If a gift is a limited edition, the amount left is indicated under the icon below the price. For the sake of simplicity, the icons designed by Susan Kare and sold by Facebook will be the only gifts studied.

The cultural behavior of giving gifts precedes Facebook. In fact, it can be found in many different cultures. For example, according to Malinowski, the *kula* ring of the Trobriand Islands exhibits the same traits of gift giving that Facebook does (Mauss 1967:19). The *kula* ring is a giant inter-tribal trade route. Enveloping all the Trobriand isles, it is an aristocratic trade in which *vaygu'a*, currency is exchanged. There are two types, *mwali* (armshells) and *soulava* (necklaces). The armshells travel from west to east while the necklaces travel from east to west: thus they continue to circulate (Mauss 1967:20-22). The only difference between Facebook gifts and the gifts of that people of the Trobriand Islands is that one exists in the physical realm while the other exists in the world of pixels and urls. Like the Trobriands, gift giving is done by the generous. Costing a dollar a gift, one must be prepared to spend money on something that in reality does not exist. Thus it is the symbolic meaning of the gift that must be of value.

Facebook users are very much aware of gift giving etiquette. "Jenna," a senior girl when explaining why she and her friends do not receive gifts comments, "None of us give them, so none of us get them." "Hannah," a junior would agree, "never given a gift nor received one—no one likes me" [laughs]. While they cannot fully articulate it, both women are not surprised that they have not received any gifts, since they do not give them. Aafke Komter writes that "gift exchange is a self-sustaining system: those who refuse to take part in it place themselves outside the community" (2005:118). Thus "Hannah's" joke that "no one likes me" reflects this idea that she is outside a certain

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community by not participating in gift exchange. They understand, whether they realize it or not, the theory of reciprocity. The main trend in gift giving on Facebook can be divided into two main categories: gifts from love interests and gifts from friends.

Romantic gift giving is a way of creating more intimacy between two people. When talking about his gifting habits, "Barry" reveals, "With my girlfriend, I gave her a gift first and then she gave me one. I responded with a wall post." "Johnny" also has received gifts from his "hook-ups." "Stacey" also said that she gives gifts to "my boyfriend for inside jokes. He doesn't reciprocate but he'll text me or mentions it on the phone." When asked about it, her boyfriend, "Harry" replied that, "I really like it when Stacey gives me gifts, I felt loved, appreciated—no that's the wrong word—cared about, part of the clan like. I enjoy getting Facebook things." The act of giving the gift made "Harry" feel more attached to "Stacey." While he never sent her back a gift, he did respond by posting on her wall, or calling her to express his gratitude. Komter writes, "things derive their meaning from their place and role within relationships" (2005:33). So even though romantic gifts appear very similar to other types of gifts since they usually involve inside jokes, it is the context in which they are given that makes them romantic. Essentially, the subjects use gifts as a vehicle to mark one's relationship.

But gifts are also employed in a more casual context between friends. For the most part, users will send and receive gifts between close friends. "Barry" amazes, "I find it interesting how people need it to establish friendships, especially between the Kappa girls. Gifts are like wall posts on steroids." In this particular social circle, gift giving is a way to maintain friendships. Komter believes that mixed motives between the giver and the receiver typify the exchange. In particular, both the giver and receiver want

to be generous but also recognized (Osteen 2002:17). The public display of gifts on one's profile suits this desire of recognition well since anyone who views the recipient's profile will see the gift. One Kappa girl who has given five gifts explains, "I've received gifts from my littles in my sorority, like inviting me to Miami. One did one randomly—it was a purse with an animal inside and she had written: "come to Smokes! [a popular bar on campus] It's funny and feels good when I see it there." Invitations and inside jokes along with the gifts help to solidify their relationships while having many gifts makes one feel socially appreciated.

"Zorro" relates his own experiences, "One girl gave me one first and then I gave her one. That's how I heard about giving gifts. The other girl, I gave her a gift first. I thought, "this is fun" I laughed, it felt good to be thought about by this person. So I responded by giving a gift back." In this situation "Zorro" first reciprocated by sending a gift to his original giver, before initiating his own gift exchange. This feeling of pleasure brought about by the gift, cemented a social bond between "Zorro" and his friends. Like "Zorro," most of "Johnny's" gifts are from female home friends. For most guys, gifts come from home friends while for the women the gifts were more mixed between college and non-college friends.

Sometimes gifts can be used in more socially ambiguous situations. "Jenna" explains, "I once gave a gift to my lab coworker. I knew him well enough to acknowledge his birthday but not well enough to buy him a gift. I got him a mouse because we had just done animal training that day." In this situation, giving a gift online solved her dilemma: how to handle an acquaintance's birthday. Putnam would agree that "the forms of our social capital—the ways in which we connect with friends and

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neighbors and strangers—are varied" (2000:27). Since "Jenna's" coworker was somewhere between stranger and friend, a unique solution was needed. Giving an icon was just personal enough without being intrusive. The gift provided the perfect resolution to a socially sensitive situation.

Gifts are the most straightforward of Facebook exchanges in comparison to existing human behavior. Gifts-giving varies in popularity among Facebook users; for some it helps build relationships while others consider it a waste of money. "Johnny" puts it perfectly, "I've only gotten one gift from each person. Maybe because I'm not saying "Thank you!" but it's nice to get a gift, even if it's a cyber one, not real but still a gift. Respect." He sums it up perfectly: if a gift is not reciprocated, then the giver will not continue to give gifts. As Jacques Derrida writes, the giving of a gift requires the suspension of the expectation of reward. Yet, once the giver recognizes that he or she has given a gift, there's a "symbolic recognition" which means that the gift is no longer given freely (Osteen 2002:15). Thus despite the giver's generosity, reciprocation becomes necessary to continue the relationship.

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Poking: Getting attention in the virtual world

Pokes

You were poked by:

poke back | remove

[Example of what a poke looks like on a user's homepage]

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Poking mystifies most Facebook users although the application is quite simple. To poke someone, one selects the "poke" icon in someone's profile. When the recipient logs onto Facebook the next time, he or she is notified on their homepage that they have been poked. He or she then has the option of poking back or ignoring it. If he or she pokes

back, the cycle starts all over again. Poking is one of the more ridiculed applications on Facebook that nonetheless is extremely popular. Rebecca jokes, "Poking's annoying in real life too" although she admits to using the application occasionally. Since it involves no messages or gift-like icons, it is the closest thing to body language or physical communication on Facebook.

It reminds me of a skit that was done doing New Student Orientation of my freshman year early September of 2004. At this point, Facebook was still something of a novelty. The skit involved one student running up to another and poking him. The message was something to the effect of don't poke on Facebook, poke out here. Poking is a "notice me" type gesture. It is generally done to either get the attention of the opposite sex or between good friends as a joke. Either way, it is generally done between those with great intimacy or desiring intimacy.

As the NSO joke reveals, poking on Facebook means placing an intermediary between the poker and the poked. Similarly, in Samoa, a boy employs a *soa*, someone to relay his message of interest to his intended lover (Mead 1928:89-90). The *soa* and poking are both examples of indirect means or use of an intermediary to foster intimacy. While poking does not necessarily have the same romantic intentions as the use of a *soa*, both are used to create a social relationship. Like with gift-giving, poking is a form of exchange. Ignoring a poke could be seen as an insult while responding too quickly could be considered "creepy".

Poking, according to one source, is one of the more bizarre applications found on Facebook. "I just don't really get it . . . Yeah I've used it, but it's weird." When pressed as to why she shrugged. It also is the only of the three applications under study that is not

mentioned on the Facebook product page. This either suggests its insignificance or futility of trying to explain it in a meaningful way to an audience. Maurice Godelier explains this confusion, "For a Western observer, this round trip seems senseless since, if the thing is given right back, it seems to have been exchanged "for nothing"" (1999:44). Since the only way to respond to a poke directly is to send one back to the giver, it seems like the original poke was nullified. But while this is the perception of many Facebook users, it is not the reality. Once a gift or a poke is given, it cannot be canceled. If the original giver is poked back, the poke is actually being given again. Although they may not understand the reasons behind poking, this explains why they continue to poke each other.

There are several categories of poking; random flirting, random jokes and intimate relationships. When a friend pokes another friend, it can be to get their attention or to get into what is called a poking war. It can also be used to flirt, by getting someone's attention. "Aaron," a senior, shares that, "Mainly girls poke me. Girls I'm hooking up with, girls I've hooked up with, or girls who have indicated that they want to." Here the girls express interest in "Aaron" by poking him. Similarly, "Zorro" recalls, "I've been poked by random girls—girls I don't even know. It's awkward." For him, random poking is strange; it is only acceptable when done by people he already knows. Random flirting, for the most part, is deemed creepy. But that was not always the case, especially in the user's earlier years of Facebook use. "Barry" tells that, "Freshman year if I met a girl I would poke her out of flirtatious interest, but not really anymore." When poking was more novel, it was a more popular form of flirting. "Johnny" recalls that Facebook used to define poking as a way of flirting.

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Since flirting via poking is considered strange, poking can also be done as a prank when done between friends. "Johnny" says, "Poking's pseudo-sexual I think. I've poked a dude before, no homo. I do it to [male] friends from home, to joke pretend to say to them "yo girl!"" "Johnny" mocks the flirting process by perverting it into a joke between friends. Similarly, "Zorro" states that, "I've poked more guys than girls, I thought it was funny. I go on friends profiles and poke every guy I can find." But that too is a form of exchange that reveals a level of comfort between the giver and the recipient.

The last form of poking is the "poking war" in which people cannot stop poking each other. "Amy," a junior, laughs, "I'm in an endless poke with my boyfriend; it started when we weren't in a real relationship and now we can't stop. It's always there, can't stop because it's rude." "Julie" also feels a sort of obligation to keep on poking back. "With poking you can either poke back or ignore, I feel bad ignoring. I wish there was a button that said, thanks and then end it." Other people continue the war for fear of offending the other person. "Johnny" says that, "We've [him and his best friend "Taryn" from home] been poking each other since we've been on Facebook, 5 years. With her, I don't want to stop. Don't want to be the one to stop, it's mutual can't stop it's the nature of the relationship, we've been best friends—she'd get mad because it's quitting and would show a lack of dedication." At this point the poking interaction is a routine, showing long-term continuity. To stop reciprocating at this point would be breaking with certain obligations that come with "Johnny" and "Taryn's" friendship. The reason that all these people feel the need to continue to poke back is that "the object which returns to its original owner *is not "given back,"* but is *"given again"* . . . thus binding two individuals or two groups into a twin relationship of reciprocal dependence" (Godelier

1999:44). Therefore they cannot stop, or it would destroy this relationship of "reciprocal dependence."

While Western society causes these users to ridicule poking as an ineffective form of exchange, it actually has quite a hold on certain individuals. The poking relationship can turn into one of mutual dependence, especially in cases where the two users are in intimate relationships, either romantically or in a close friendship. Since poking suggests a relationship of mutual dependence, pokes by random people is deemed "awkward and uncomfortable." These social feelings of awkwardness are exploited when poking is done as a joke. The users recognize how strange it is to receive a poke from an unfamiliar person and therefore will deliberately poke them for amusement. This is a perversion of an exchange that is for more intimate relationships.

Wall Writing: Public Messages in the virtual world

[Example of how to post on a user's wall]

Wall writing is one of the older applications on Facebook and is used in a variety of ways. Added as a feature in September of 2004, the wall, according to Facebook, "is a forum for users' friends to post comments or insights about them. Users can always remove comments they don't like from their own walls. They can restrict who can see their wall, or turn it off entirely, by going to the "Profile" section of the Privacy page (http://www.facebook.com/press/product.php). While Facebook focuses more on the

privacy aspects of the wall, the focus here will remain on the content. To write on someone's wall, a user clicks on the text box under the Wall section of the recipient's profile. Once the user finishes his or her message, he or she clicks on the post button. The message along with the writer's picture then appear on the recipient's wall.

Since wall writing involves posting messages on another's profile, it is a public form of expression, making it visible to anyone who accesses that page. Messages range from inside jokes, to birthday wishes to a means of updating people's lives (i.e. travel, lunch plans, etc). It is a very open form of communication since anyone who has access to the recipient's profile can view the message. Writing on one's wall using invokes the necessity of the recipient to respond by posting back on the giver's wall. Depending on the type of post, the time period between exchanges varies.

This public display of exchange of dialogue would be similar to papers written in reaction to one another in an academic journal in which one scholar responds to another's ideas in a public forum. This can also be seen in the form of rap battles between hip-hop stars such as Nas and Jay-Z (Century 2002). Richard Seaford writes in terms of Homeric poetry that, "The tendency of oral poetry to express and legitimate the interests and aspirations of its audience is well documented" (1994:5). Similarly wall writing is a form of communication between the writer and the audience: the recipient and his or her friends.

Wall writing, like the other forms of exchange on Facebook can be divided into subgroups. In this case several distinct types of wall writing can be observed: jokes/keeping in touch between close friends, and random conversation starters. A third and very interesting type to note, is the birthday post. Inside jokes with good friends used

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to be the most popular type of wall writing. Most of the subjects recalled that they wrote on people's walls more often earlier in their college career and noted that their younger coeds and high schoolers seem to use it much more. Or as "Jenna" puts it, "My little sister and her friends use the wall to ask about plans, it's so retarded." To the older generation of Facebook users like "Jenna," wall writing is for writing witty banter not for conversations. Hence, more of a stigma surrounds wall postings that ask mundane questions about someone's life. Words are the most basic form of exchange, a place where ideas and witty words can be transferred (Godbout and Caille 1998:12-13). In general, when this generation of Facebook users is examined, clever wall postings are preferred over conversations.

Not all witty joking is welcomed. In fact, sometimes, the joking can be embarrassing. "Sara" once considered erasing one such post. "I didn't delete it because I thought it would be more noticeable if I deleted. I was planning on writing something embarrassing on her wall to call her out on something more embarrassing." But in the end she did not follow through with her plan. When asked why, she explained that she was afraid that her friend would counter with something even more embarrassing. Forms of exchange are not necessarily always for bettering social bonds, it can also be used to damage them. "Sara's" situation can be likened to the relationship between the United States and Russia during the Cold War: one of mutually assured destruction. In this case, reciprocity is contemplated in a more vengeful sort of way.

Lack of reciprocation can also have negative consequences. In some instances, wall posts are rejected because they offend the receiver. "Jenna" tells a story that, "I once deleted a post from my cousin that said, "Are you as pissed as I am that we haven't

graduated yet?" It pissed me off so I waited until it was the second or third post down so he wouldn't notice that I took it off. Although he hasn't posted on my wall since and he used to do it a lot." Since she rejected his initiation, he has not tried to offer a new one at all, showing the power of rejection. Ignoring a wall post can be just as offensive. "Barry" experienced this. "One girl once wrote on my wall and I didn't respond and then a week later her friend came up to me and made a comment about it. That night I wrote back on her wall. Like a conversation, people should reply to a post or it's like giving the cold shoulder." His non response must have really bothered the girl if she ended up having her friend say something to "Barry." While writing on someone's wall is supposed to be "free," the expectation for a response is there. As Godbout and Caille say, "Social cohesions changes at everyone moment; it becomes stronger or weaker as a function of the countless decisions on the part of each member of a society to trust another member by taking the risk that a gift will not be reciprocated" (1994:188). This shows how important reciprocating on wall posts is in the Facebook community. By ignoring a post, one ignores the offer of a social bond and relationships can be damaged.

The conversation, as termed by the subjects, is another form of wall writing. Conversation is defined as writing done by people who post specific questions on people's walls like, "What are you doing this summer?" or "I'm coming to LA, want to hang out?" Most people interviewed feel that questions such as this are private and should not be mentioned on a public venue such as a wall, which shows up on someone's profile. As "Meg" vents, "It's a cop-out way of being personal that isn't being personal…Wall posting is supposed to be about inside jokes but the other day I got a random person who posted on my wall, asking about New York and seeing if I'll be

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there. So I guess it's connecting or a more public way of saying that I have friends….but I didn't wall back because it was an actual conversation so I privately messaged her back." "Meg" considered this type of posting more suited for private messaging and therefore responded by doing just that.

Birthday messages on users' walls are a more common form of posting mentioned by many subjects. When a member signs into Facebook, a list of friend's birthdays appears on the right hand side of the homepage. It usually lists whose birthday is on that day and also whose birthdays are coming up. Since this information is readily available, it encourages users to respond, generally by posting on the birthday person's wall. "Johnny" explains, "I don't post that often now, I used to do it for people's birthdays but now EVERYONE does it, it's not personal. I love that Facebook reminds you of people's birthdays." To "Johnny," wall writing is a way to acknowledge someone's birthday, but since it became a more common practice, the post has less value. Similarly, rarity of a gift adds to its value. "Julie" would concur, "I once deleted a random girl's post on my wall because she was the first to wish me a happy birthday—I didn't know her!" "Julie" rejected this random girl's post because it held no value to her. Since they are not close, "Julie" did not see a reason to initiate such an exchange, let alone respond. Rather than create a bond between the two of them by leaving the post of and thereby creating the necessity of a response, she preferred to reject the gesture by deleting it. Discovering who writes on his wall amuses "Harry." "It's always interesting to see which random people post on your birthday that you haven't talked to in a year." Random birthday posting does not offend him; instead it intrigues him to see who views his birthday worthy of acknowledgement. Likewise, "Harry" writes on people's walls on their

birthdays. In describing his behavior he says, "I do birthday posts, but I don't respond to mine." Although "Harry" does not believe that he responds to the birthday posts on his wall, his statement suggests otherwise. The posts that he receives in fact demand that he reciprocate: by posting on other's walls on their birthdays. Essentially, "Harry" follows Putnam's rule of generalized reciprocity, that "I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor" (2000:134). Birthday posting is directly applicable to this rule. "Harry" writes birthday messages on people's walls because they have for him in the past, or now will in the future. He does it because birthday etiquette demands that if someone acknowledges his birthday, he is obligated to acknowledge his or hers in return.

Wall posting therefore is a valuable part of maintaining social bonds on Facebook. Writing jokes and witty banter is preferred over conversations starters. "Sara" agrees, "It takes more time to say something clever, it means more." More dangerous however, are the consequences of ignoring a wall post. It can result in offending the giver, possibly to the point of ending the reciprocal relationship. These consequences can carry out beyond Facebook into the physical community. Birthday posting epitomizes this form of exchange. Recognition of a post by the recipient is delayed; it occurs on the giver's birthday. The popularity of birthday wall messages attests to the strength of this reciprocal relationship. Thus wall writing is a powerful form of exchange on Facebook, cementing community bonds.

Conclusion

The media lauds technology as a surging tide bringing waves of change to our lives. They tend to lump Facebook into that category. Facebook does change the face of interactions but perhaps not in the way that they envision. Instead, institutions like Facebook show that no matter how much technology may enhance our lives, human behavior essentially does not change. Although humans create new technologies and social forums, our cultural behaviors remain constant; they are just carried out over new mediums. Facebook is successful not because of its monetary gains but because it functions as a community.

Not only is Facebook a community, it also shares the same characteristics that physical communities possess. In particular, the forms of reciprocity and gift exchange exhibited in physical communities manifests itself on Facebook as well. Therefore it should come as no surprise that Facebook users demonstrate the same sort of actions as the *kula* ring that Mauss observed. Communities are based on social bonds which in turn are maintained through practices of reciprocity. Gift giving, poking and wall writing all function as forms of exchange. These interactions show that reciprocity has more to do with the underlying meanings and obligations than the actual objects. Thus, pixels and words serve just as important of a social purpose on Facebook as the lending of a book to a friend.

Gift giving, as a Facebook application, reveals that the virtual gesture of giving a gift is what matters. Those who choose not to participate understand very well why they do not receive gifts: because they do not give them. The giving of gifts falls into one of two categories on Facebook. Gifts between romantic interests constitute the first type. These, while not always reciprocated with another gift, are generally acknowledged

through some other form of communication. The second type of gift giving is that between friends. These generally are more likely to be reciprocated with a gift in return. In socially ambiguous situations, gifts are also utilized. By accepting an icon, the recipient also becomes obligated to the giver, creating a social bond.

Bonds form through poking as well. When someone responds to a poke by poking the giver back, it means that the gift is given again, rather than nullified. That explains why although the subjects failed to articulate it, the reason that they could not stop poking someone back was because obligation created by the poke would not allow it. In essence, poking back means that the recipient gives the gesture again, continuing a relationship of mutual dependence. Because poking serves as a mechanism for getting a user's attention, it usually occurs between love interests or good friends. Romantically, poking works as a way to flirt; while between good friends it becomes a habitual relationship of mutual dependence or a way of joking by mock flirting. In this way, poking creates relationships of intimacy.

Wall writing, the final form of exchange looked at in this study, contains many of the same components as gift giving and poking. Like these other mechanisms of exchange, reciprocity plays a key role in the posting of messages. Witty comments and inside jokes are the preferred type of writing and ones that require a clever comeback. Deleting or ignoring a post can offend the giver, damaging their relationship with the recipient. Denying an offer, the message, is like refusing a gift which results in the severing of bonds between the giver and receiver. Since wall writing is a public form of communication, conversation type postings are looked down upon. Yet the perfect example of wall exchanges occurs on birthdays. The birthday post demonstrates

reciprocity at its finest: people post on the birthday person's wall, and while the recipient does not respond right away, they will post on others' walls when their birthdays come. Reciprocity does not always mean giving something back right away but instead confers an obligation for some sort of comparable response at some point. Hence, the popularity of the birthday posts. The exchange of birthday messages constructs a link between the two actors, shaping a social relationship.

Gift-giving, poking, and wall writing are all functions on Facebook with real world counterparts. Exchange—whether it occurs through these virtual applications or by giving a birthday card—has the same social obligations attached to it. Interestingly enough, all three forms of exchange involve components of jokes in them. If this was to be studied further, I would suggest looking into the purpose of jokes in social situations. While most of the relationships affected by these exchanges already exist, they are recognized and strengthened by these actions. While Facebook represents the next wave of social interaction, the behaviors and actions of the users stays consistent with preexisting behaviors and actions. Therefore, Facebook is a community and also is why Facebook, as virtual society, functions just the same as a physical community. Whether exchanging shells or pixels on a screen, gift-giving remains a cultural constant.

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Figures

Figure 1: The login page for Facebook (www.facebook.com).
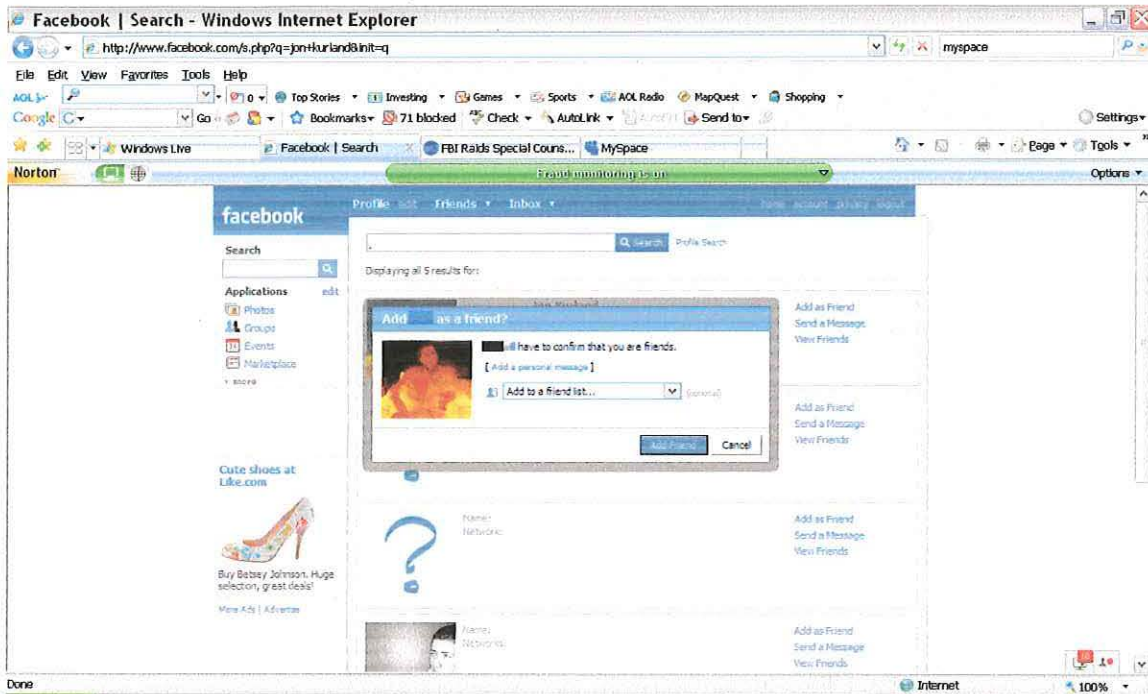

Figure 2: Example of a user's profile (www.facebook.com).

Figure 3: Example of how to friend someone on Facebook (www.facebook.com).
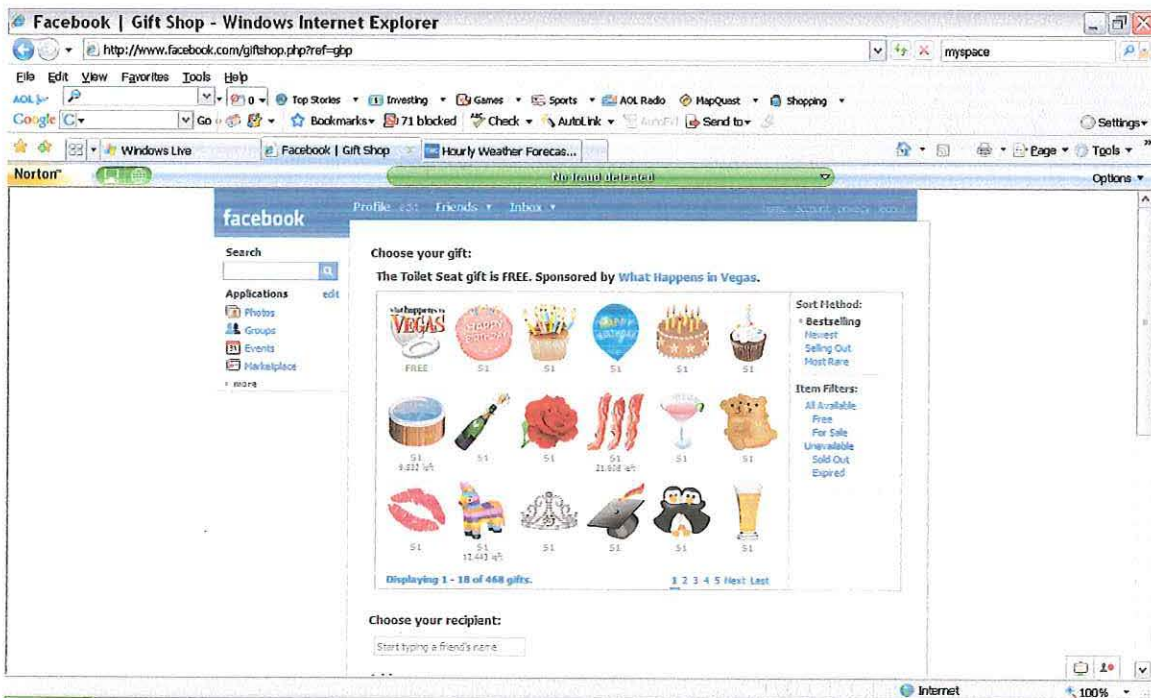
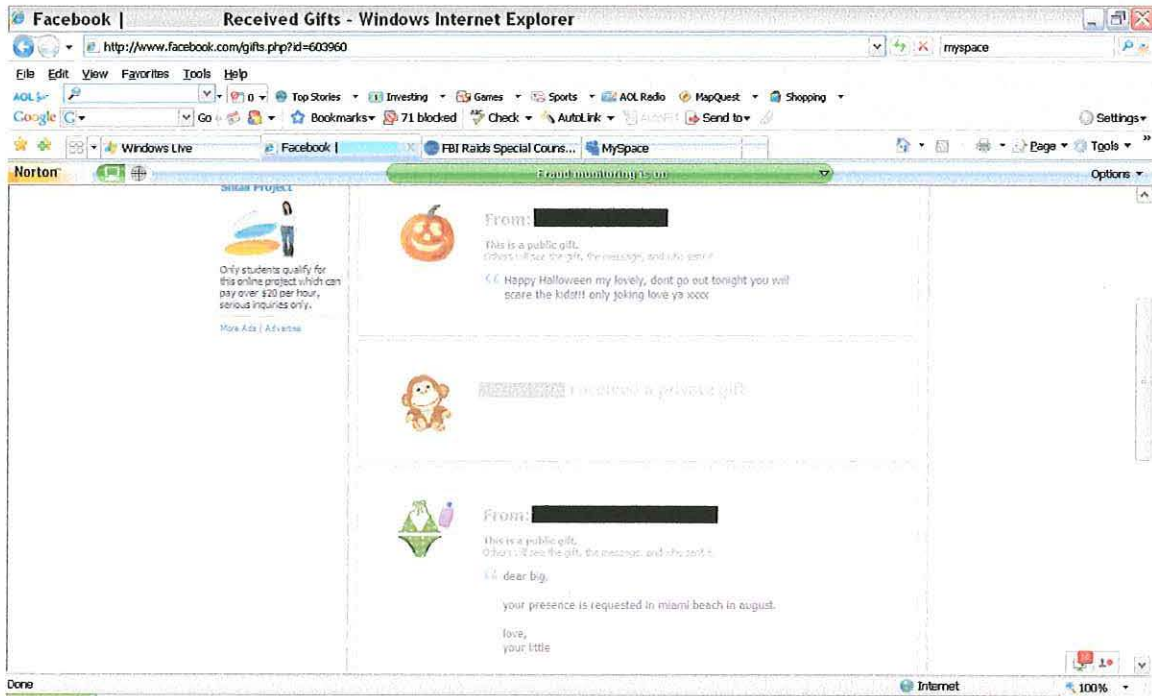Figure 4: The Facebook Gift Shop where gifts are selected and purchased (www.facebook.com).

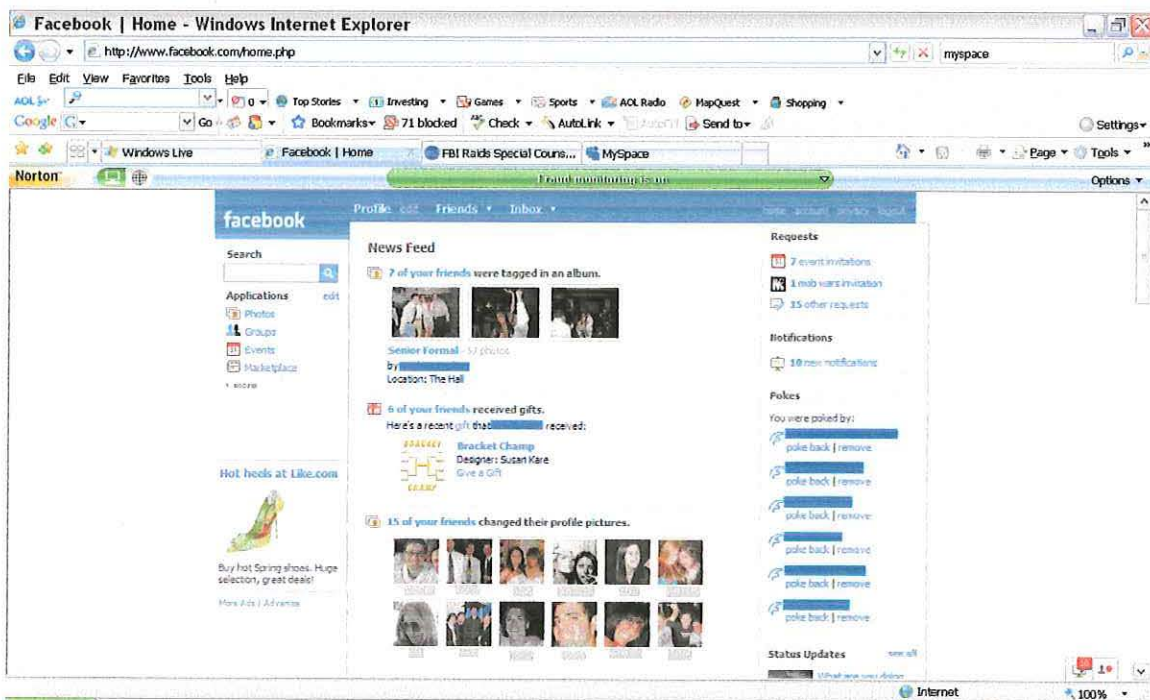Figure 5: Examples of gifts posted on a user's wall (www.facebook.com).

Figure 6: The Facebook homepage, the screen that opens after logging in. On the left hand side is where the user can see who poked (www.facebook.com).
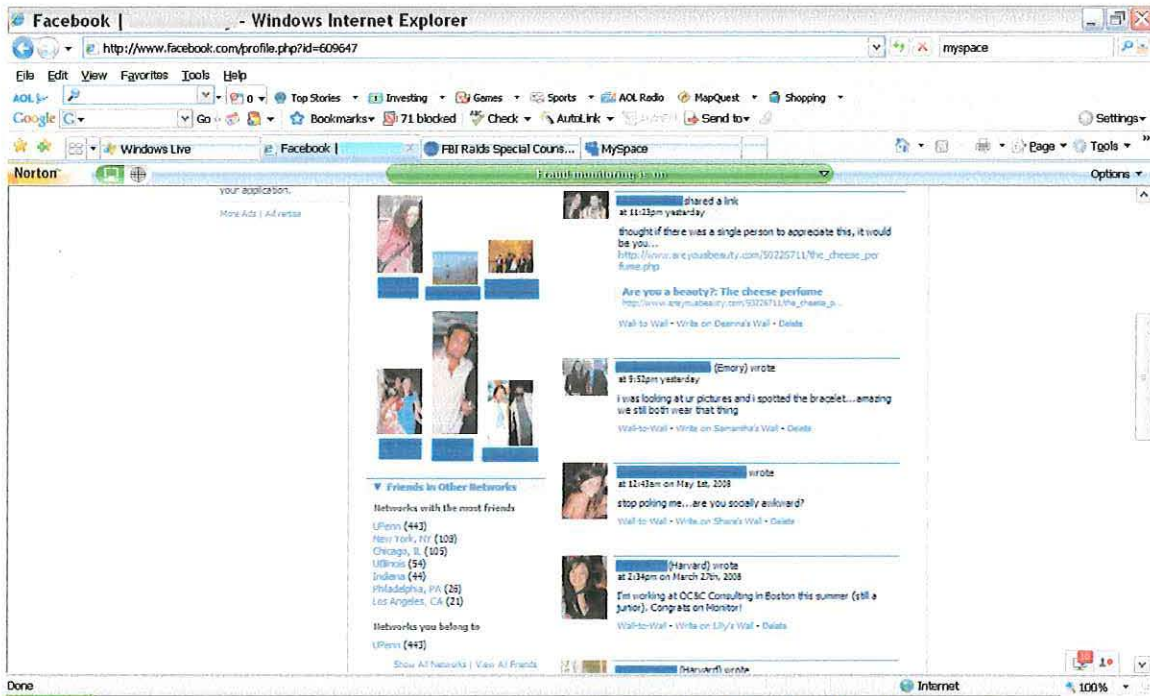
Figure 7: Examples of wall posts on a user's wall (www.facebook.com).