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## THE METHODOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES AND CHALLENGES OF USING FACEBOOK TO RESEARCH STUDY ABROAD

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### **Abstract**

*Some study abroad (SA) researchers use Facebook as a tool to reach participants or as the site or context of research. In Dressler and Dressler (2016), we examined the linguistic identity positioning of one sojourner in Facebook posts over two sojourns. In this paper, we determine the methodological affordances and challenges of the social media site as both a tool and context of research. We conclude that for the original study, using Facebook enabled us to download large amounts of observational data and study the identity positioning over time. Throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing, we encountered challenges regarding ownership of data, the dynamic nature of Facebook over the two time periods of the study, the use of photographs, and our focus on the textual aspects of posting. From this analysis, we provide recommendations for the use of Facebook in SA research moving forward.*

### **1. Introduction**

Social media and technology use among study abroad (SA) sojourners has changed the nature of the SA experience. Most students stay connected while abroad, making use of multiple ways to communicate by means of various social media platforms (Godwin-Jones, 2016). Among those platforms, Facebook is by far the most popular. In a 2012 survey of internet users in the US, 94% of teens reported having a Facebook profile (Duggan & Smith, 2013) while in the same year

73% of online adults were on Facebook (Duggan & Smith, 2013). As a result of the popularity of Facebook among SA sojourners, how sojourners use Facebook during SA is of interest to scholars in the field (Dressler & Dressler, 2016; Kinginger, 2013; R. Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2015). Using Facebook offers SA researchers a myriad of possible topics of study including linguistic development; identity positioning; academic, social, and cultural engagement; and social network development.

Despite the increasing interest in Facebook use, research examining the methodological challenges and affordances of using Facebook to study SA is surprisingly scarce. Existing studies differ in how researchers use Facebook with two distinct categories emerging: those studies that use Facebook as a tool to reach study participants (see Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, & Stillwell, 2015; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Zhuravleva, de Bot, & Hilton, 2016) and those studies that use Facebook as the site or context of research (see Back, 2013; K. Mitchell, 2012; Riley, 2013). These studies shed light on some of the possible methodological challenges SA researchers confront when using Facebook, either as a research tool or the research context.

In this study, we examine the methodological affordances and challenges of using Facebook in one particular SA study: Dressler & Dressler, 2016, which examined one sojourner's (Anja Dressler, referred to in the study as Teen) identity positioning in Facebook during two SA sojourns (6 months in 2010/11 and 5 months in 2014). In the original study, we examined how Teen positioned herself as an emerging bilingual of German, by posting in one or both languages, reporting on the ups and downs of her learning, and commenting on her cultural and linguistic understandings. In this examination of the methodological learning we did while conducting the original study, we identify methodological affordances and challenges and provide guidelines for future research.

## **2. Researching Facebook Use**

The popularity of different social media platforms is continually changing. Facebook has achieved the milestone of 13+ years of popularity and used worldwide since 2006 (Di Capua, 2012). This popularity leads to a natural inclination for SA researchers to gravitate toward using Facebook as a research tool or research context. Both uses provide a glimpse into both the current situation and potential future for the use of Facebook to research SA.

### **2.1 Facebook as Research Tool**

As a research tool, Facebook is useful for participant recruitment and research communication. Participant recruitment is accomplished through the use of Facebook advertising or Facebook Messenger. Facebook Messenger can be helpful for research communication as well, even if participants were recruited by other means. As a digital and popular platform, Facebook and its applications make for useful recruitment and data collection tools.

Recruitment through Facebook advertising requires researchers to purchase targeted advertising on Facebook. Researchers can choose the overall amount to spend or cost per result (e.g., returned responses). Kosinski, et al., (2015) documented their success with Facebook to reach almost 10 million users, over several studies, and demonstrate the potential of Facebook advertising to reach targeted audiences. For their studies, Facebook users completed a quiz for the reward of accessing a personality assessment, while also consenting to the use of their quiz answers as data. Bond and Agnew (2016) used their project's Facebook page to reach 26 000 people and Facebook advertising to recruit 200 young people in a study of views on educational attainment. Greischel, Noack, and Neyer (2016) used age-targeted advertising to recruit 1043 adolescents who had spent a year abroad to determine how it influenced their personality

development. Facebook advertising is costly, but the researchers mentioned above found it effective in recruiting large numbers of qualified individuals into their studies.

Researchers have also recruited participants via Facebook groups, pages where like-minded individuals gather around a topic (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Brooks & Waters, 2010). While Brooks and Waters (2010) do not describe in detail how they recruited participants via groups, Baltar and Brunet (2012) explained that they examined the member lists of specific Facebook groups and sent individual Facebook Messenger invitations to participate in research to members who appeared to meet the criteria of their study of Argentinean immigrant entrepreneurs in Spain. This method of participant recruitment may be more time-consuming, but adds a personal touch that potential participants may appreciate.

Research communication using Facebook Messenger has been described in several studies. Facebook Messenger started out as an instant messaging service within Facebook whereby users could send personal messages to one or more people. It was later released as a separate application in August 2011. Once participants have been recruited, researchers send messages using the Messenger app to communicate regarding the research. Zhuravleva, de Bot, and Hilton, (2016) used Facebook Messenger to send participants periodic messages, timed throughout the day, to instruct them to record the particular activity they were engaged in and the language they were using for that activity. Messenger proved convenient since participants could respond wherever they happened to be and this convenience resulted in a higher response rate than the researchers received via paper-based questionnaires, which they also used. Baker (2013) used Messenger to keep in contact with her participants over a two and a half year ethnographic study, when she realized that Facebook membership is more constant than cell phone numbers

and mailing addresses. These two studies demonstrate the versatility of Facebook Messenger for research communication.

These research studies demonstrated the particular advantages that using Facebook as a research tool can provide. While SA researchers may be interested in Facebook as a research tool, the greater interest lies in the use of Facebook as a context of research.

## **2.2 Facebook as Research Context**

As SA researchers debate the effect that social media engagement has on the SA experience (Godwin-Jones, 2016; Mikal & Grace, 2012; Sandel, 2014), Facebook as a research context emerges as not only intriguing, but also salient. In conducting this research, two strands are evident: studies *about* Facebook use (using self-report data) and studies *of* Facebook use (using observational data). Each strand reflects the goals of the particular research.

In a large survey of over 100 studies *about* Facebook use, Di Capua (2012) noted that most studies employed surveys and relied upon self-report data. Back (2013), looking at SA research about Facebook use, also noted a preference toward self-report data. These self-report data are often gathered via surveys. Researchers conducted research on Facebook use via surveys, learning that Facebook users sought to make friends or rekindle old friendships (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) or joined groups to socialize, be entertained, seek status, or seek information (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). In an SA setting, researchers used surveys to determine how sojourners access and create support networks (Mikal & Grace, 2012), how messages influence their attitudes toward SA (Teng, Khong, Chong, & Lin, 2017), and how they negotiate a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO - the fear that they are missing out on fun being had by

others) (Hetz, Dawson, & Cullen, 2016). Survey data, popular among studies about Facebook use, provide a glimpse into what users do on Facebook and why.

Research of Facebook use necessitates observational data. Data collection involves a number of methods: mining or “friending” and screenshotting. Mining involves an app or software that can access a large number of Facebook posts and gather the ones with targeted keywords. One study that used mining is Schwab and Greitemeyer (2015), in which they examined the intercultural composition of participants’ Facebook networks, with their permission, by having them click on the link to a Facebook app they designed for that purpose. The researchers felt this form of data collection facilitated a more objective assessment of participants’ social networks. Friending and screenshotting is found more often in research of Facebook than downloading of data, although researchers do not always make these methods explicit in their writing. Baker (2013) gathered longitudinal data of attitudes toward academic writing by collecting “any status updates that pertained to their reading and writing practices” (p. 137). Stirling (2016) reported using screenshots and downloads, supplemented by field notes, to observe online behaviour, but how downloads were accessed is not made explicit. In SA, researchers have reported sending a Facebook friend request to participants to gain access to their online posts, taking screenshots during the study period, and analyzing those screenshots for language use (Back, 2013; Levine, 2014; Riley, 2013). Friending, screenshotting and to a lesser extent, mining, provide the observational data of Facebook use researchers seek in order to understand users’ behaviour on Facebook.

### **2.3 Theoretical Frameworks for Researching Study Abroad**

Whether using Facebook as a research tool or research context, Facebook provides affordances for researching SA which are dependent upon the theoretical framework the

researcher draws from. While positivistic SA studies exist, which examine sojourner learning as discrete measurable units (Teng et al., 2017; Greischel et al., 2016), interpretivist studies, which treat sojourner learning as context-embedded and socially constructed, appear more common. Often, SA researchers are drawn to study language development in SA. While some L2 learners do not use Facebook for their L2, even while on SA (Levine, 2014), naturalistic use, if it does occur, can shed light on language development (Back, 2013; Riley, 2013). Some students post in the target language, demonstrating their proficiency, but some students continue to use their first language for social media activity, even while abroad (Back, 2013). Others play with the target language through non-standard writing in alignment with the genre of social media posting (Riley, 2013). As well, knowing that Facebook is attractive to L2 learners, and that they do so primarily for social reasons (Mitchell, 2012), to communicate with friends and improve their knowledge of language and culture, SA researchers find Facebook useful for examining identity positioning (Dressler & Dressler, 2016; Trentman, 2013). Dressler and Dressler (2016) used the interpretivist concept of positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991; Norton & Toohey, 2011) to analyze how the unique nature of Facebook allowed Teen<sup>i</sup> to position herself as a bilingual while on SA. Trentman (2013) studied Arabic learners in Egypt, whose imagined community (Norton & Toohey, 2011) of sojourners in the Middle East strengthened their investment in the SA experience. SA research encompasses a large spectrum of theoretical frameworks, but research using Facebook is a particular affordance for interpretivist research.

## **2.4 Ethics and Logistics of Using Facebook**

Social media research ethics is emerging as a subfield of research ethics that can shed light on the ethics of using Facebook to research SA. Researchers note concerns such as what is public versus private (Baker, 2013; Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014).

Thus, Facebook may appear very public, but users may have a strong feeling of privacy (Hewson, 2016). After all, it is a private, closed site to which members agree to policies and conditions upon joining (Stirling, 2016). Facebook's terms and conditions do not require that outside research be vetted, but several policies impact research. For example, no one may collect users' content or information, or otherwise access Facebook without the prior permission of Facebook, whether by manual or automated means (such as harvesting bots, robots, spiders, or scrapers). This public/private distinction determines what researchers interpret as requiring permission and from whom. While these concerns are not unique to Facebook, in reviewing the above Facebook studies, it became clear that explicit ethical understandings of how the researchers used Facebook were often absent.

Logistically, the use of Facebook for SA research is challenged by the dynamic nature that also makes it an attractive tool or context. Detailed descriptions of social media platform features are scarce, and many platforms experience changes (e.g., Twitter, online games), so researchers are advised to "audit the site and provide a full description" (Kelly-Holmes, 2015, p. 135). Since older posts are changed to match new formats and features, one cannot rely upon the actual Facebook platform to provide an indication of changes. For example, in the Dressler and Dressler (2016) study, the separation of the messaging function in Facebook into a separate app reduced the number of posts in the second sojourn. As a result, drawing conclusions based on number of posts would have been ill-informed and the introduction of Messenger had to be noted as a possible influence. As Stirling (2017) noted, "Facebook today is a different site from what it was [...] when the data collection for this study was completed" (p. 211). Thus, the dynamic nature of Facebook is an important factor to consider when using Facebook to research SA.



Considering the above research, we recognize the need for an examination of the experience of conducting research on SA using Facebook. Specifically, we use our study of one adolescent's use of Facebook over the course of two SA sojourns to review the process of conducting this research and writing up the results for dissemination. The following research question guided this examination:

What are the affordances and challenges associated with researching SA using Facebook?

### **3. Methodology**

The context for this research is a study in which we examined Facebook posts from one sojourner's two separate SA experiences (Dressler & Dressler, 2016) in Germany. During the first sojourn, Teen was 15 years old, lived with relatives, and attended an academic German high school (Gymnasium) for one semester. She had only started learning German the school year before that. During the second sojourn, Teen was 19 years old, lived in a university residence for international students, and attended a semester at a German university. She was studying linguistics and German and took courses taught in both German and English.

Since the sojourns were second language learning sojourns, we analyzed posts ( $N = 495$ ) for language choice, language experiences, and language awareness. During the process of doing the research, we recognized methodological affordances and challenges embedded in the data collection, analysis and writing phases. While we recognized some of these affordances and challenges early on, others emerged only when reviewers made requests for clarification or improvement that necessitated addressing or clarifying methodological choices. This experience of using Facebook as a context for research prompted our investigation into the methodology of using Facebook for SA research.

The data sources for this current paper include our research documentation (raw and analyzed data), drafts of articles with track changes from editor and reviewers, and reviewer/editor response documents. We analyzed the data together by reviewing data sources, noting affordances and challenges. When an aspect was both an affordance and a challenge, we labeled it as both, providing an explanation of why. We then reread the coding, flagging and categorizing them as aspects of data collection, analysis, or writing. In choosing the findings to highlight for this paper, we considered the applicability of the findings beyond our study, noting which aspects other SA researchers might encounter and which aspects were unique to our study.

#### **4. Findings**

The affordances and challenges of using Facebook to study SA arise in three areas of research: data collection, data analysis, and writing. Within each area, we found aspects in which the use of Facebook supported our examination of the two sojourns as well as specific challenges that necessitated reflection and further research.

##### **4.1 Data collection**

Our work on the original study began with addressing the ethical challenge of ownership of the data, which Roswita Dressler<sup>ii</sup>, recognized in advance. The Chair of our institution's research ethics board (IREB) determined that, since the Facebook posts had already been written, Anja Dressler could be approached about the use of the data with two agreed-upon provisions. First, rather than ask for permission for retroactive use, Anja would be invited to research and write as a co-investigator. Second, no data identifying anyone other than Anja would be used. These two provisions provided the affordance of observational data, but limited analysis to posts authored by Anja.

Data procurement for our study began with a request for the Anja's data. Facebook users have the right to request a copy of their data by selecting "settings", "general", "download a copy of your data", then "start my archive". Within a matter of hours, the data arrive via email as a zip file with separate html files containing all text, pictures and links associated with the Facebook member's account since the beginning of her time with the social media platform. These data arrive with time stamps so that it is clear when each text, picture, or link was posted. The procurement was simple and in our case the request was fulfilled within one week of making it. These files afforded us a large, but complete data set from which we could begin to work.

Data management, then, is where the work began. Anticipating the potential confusion of working with such a large amount of data, we began by keeping a log of the data management. We transferred the html containing textual posts to a Word document. We used the time stamps (e.g., "Sunday, November 10, 2010 at 3:17pm UTC-07") to determine the ranges of data that we were working with and deleted all entries that occurred outside of the two time frames we were examining. We then copied and pasted the remaining entries into two pages of an Excel file, which allowed for easier management. We used the status headers (e.g., "[Friend] wrote on your timeline") to locate entries made by others and deleted them from the data, since we were focusing on posts made by Anja Dressler only due to our study emphasis and ethics limitations. We then deleted all time stamps and status headers. Although the original folder contained a file with pictures, we did not use these. However, we did notice our data contained picture captions, which, if they were written by the Anja, we decided to keep as part of the data. The remaining posts were used for analysis. We wrote up this detailed description of procedure to demonstrate the affordances of these downloaded data and make our data management explicit.

## **4.2 Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data involved making decisions around four challenges. First, we became aware of changes in Facebook over time that would impact analysis. Second, we had to decide whether to analyze photos that we received in the data package. Third, we had to decide whether and how to analyze cross-postings and notifications from other social media platforms, specifically Spotify, an online music streaming app. Lastly, we became aware that Teen's use of Facebook changed over time in ways that would also impact analysis. These challenges necessitated decision-making that needed to be documented as it affected the analysis of language choice, language experiences, and language awareness.

When we noticed the status headers in the data, we were alerted to the changes in Facebook over the time frame of the study: changes that would affect the analysis. We spent some time looking for a definitive academic source that documented the changes in the social media platform over time. This eluded us, so we resorted to documenting the time periods covered in the literature we had surveyed, looking for noted changes, and adding this information to our own personal knowledge of Facebook changes. This challenge is especially difficult considering the two separate time periods of our study, as we were limited in comparison claims, by differences between the two. For example, Facebook changed from its Wall and Profile pages to a Timeline format in December 2011, between the two time periods of the study. While this change did not change the data file, it did change what we saw when we went back to Facebook to see what her posts looked like in context. The posts we see now, even if they are from the first sojourn, have been changed retroactively. This naturally impacts the claims we can make about what the posts looked like and how Teen might have been positioning herself (Dressler & Dressler, 2016). While we were able to work with this challenge as outlined above, it remains a challenge that most researchers using Facebook to study SA face.

We had IREB clearance to use the Facebook data except names and pictures of others, yet we wrestled with the ethical use of pictures without others and picture captions in general. We could cloak the identity of others using replacement words (e.g., “[Friend]”), but we interpreted the provision to mean that we could not use pictures containing people other than Anja. After discussion, we felt that to use only some pictures (e.g., those of scenery or of Teen) without using others (i.e., those with friends and family) would present a skewed representation of the SA sojourn; as a result, we chose to use picture captions (text), but none of the pictures. We recognized the loss in not being able to capitalize on the multimodal nature of Facebook, but we felt that picture captions would serve the purpose of examining language choice, language experience and language awareness, as was our goal.

The third challenge we encountered was how to analyze aspects of other social media platforms shared to Facebook. Within the data, we found notifications that indicated that Teen had linked her Facebook account to the Spotify account she opened in her second sojourn. These notifications simply said “[Teen] listened to [name of song] by [artist] on Spotify” and were not text generated by the user. This linking is common among Facebook users who share what they have posted on other platforms (e.g., pictures on Instagram) or use their login to access other platforms (Rettberg, 2014). After returning to Teen’s Facebook account, we determined that the Spotify notifications were linked, but not visible posts, so we removed them from the data set. If these notifications had been public or if she had been sharing Instagram photos on Facebook, we might have made a different decision when it came to interactional data between other digital media platforms and Facebook.

Lastly, during the data management phase, we realized that Teen’s Facebook use changed over time. Although we had not begun the analysis, Roswita, recognized that the work of

cleaning up the data set would bring Anja, then 19 years old, in contact with posts she had written at the age of 15. To provide some perspective, Anja wrote a reflection that supplemented those data. That reflection involved responding to two questions Roswita determined would be helpful: How were the two experiences similar/different? How was my relationship with Facebook similar/different? The reflection revealed that Anja treated her Facebook posts with more maturity in the second sojourn, being older, but also more cognizant of the expanded audience of adults that she had added to her friend list by that point in time. This reflection allowed us to situate the posts in the data in light of the mindset of Teen at the time of their composition and recognize the differences in Facebook use over the course of the two sojourns.

### **4.3 Writing**

In the writing phase, we needed to address some methodological challenges anew and some for the first time. Reviewers called upon us to explain the decision-making behind the lack of analysis of pictures, the lack of reference to the interconnectivity of social media platforms, the changes in Facebook use over time beyond what Anja had identified in her reflection and our reluctance to quantify the data. In addition, our use of Facebook posts as a form of narrative was questioned. The interactions with reviewers required additional reflection upon the affordances and challenges of using Facebook to study SA.

In returning to our decision-making about the use of picture captions rather than pictures, we confirmed and communicated our decision to focus on textual aspects of Teen's identity positioning. We recognized the affordance that pictures could provide but pointed out our ethical limitations as well as the limitations that came from changes in Teen's use of Facebook over time. We included a section in the article to explain that Teen posted much differently in her first sojourn than her second, since in the latter she had a smartphone and mobile data which allowed

for more frequent and immediate posting of pictures. This difference in picture-posting behavior, along with our reluctance to focus on only a subset of the pictures for ethical reasons, provided a strong rationale for the methodological choice we made.

A similar question touched on the choice to remove Spotify notifications. Since those notifications could potentially shed light on changes in Teen's musical preferences because of her SA experiences, reviewers pointed to the interesting potential these notifications held for analysis. We agreed with such an analysis in theory. However, Spotify's availability occurred late in the second SA sojourn (first in Germany - March 2012; later in Canada – September 2014) which meant that it resulted in no notifications in her first sojourn data and likely only in German in the second sojourn data. Despite our focus on language choice, language experience and language awareness, we did not feel the data from Spotify were useful, especially as the notifications were not visible on Teen's Facebook wall.

Perhaps because of the discussion about Teen's Facebook behavior concerning pictures and music, reviewers also challenged us to document Teen's social media behavior in general and Facebook use in particular to a depth that was not covered by the post-sojourn reflection. Fortunately, as a participant researcher, Anja was able to recall aspects of her Facebook use that were important to an understanding of the data, primarily the changes in ease and frequency that came with the acquisition of a smartphone and mobile data. The ability to provide both an emic and etic perspective proved particularly useful to address this challenge.

Our data set contained 495 posts that Teen had written over the course of two SA sojourns. Early on we had decided not to include a table of posts broken down by sojourn because we wanted to focus on the changes in the quality and content of the posts, rather than their number. However, when asked by a reviewer to include a table to that effect, we wrestled

once more with this decision. Yet, the previous exercise of reflecting upon Teen's Facebook use over time brought to light another change which impacted the number of posts that were written in the second sojourn. Anja noted that she posted frequently in her first sojourn and that some of those posts were personal comments to individuals. Between the sojourns, Facebook developed a Messenger app (chat feature), which caused Teen to redirect personal comments she might previously have posted to Facebook to Messenger instead. As a result, she posted less frequently, but with greater eloquence in her second sojourn. This improved quality of post came from her increased competence in her L2. As a result, we decided to create a table that focused on the improved quality, rather than the quantity of posts over the two sojourns, a decision which satisfied the intention of the reviewers to provide more clarity regarding the posts.

One aspect that reviewers questioned was not originally considered in the data collection and analysis phases. We were asked to address how Facebook posts could be considered as narratives in light of the multimodality of the medium. This question challenged two of our decisions: first, to view the text as narratives and second, to analyze the text only, despite its interactions with the primarily visual, although arguably sometimes also auditory, medium. As identity researchers, we felt that the status updates could be considered autobiographic narratives (Pavlenko, 2007) or microblogging (Rettberg, 2014), which we termed micronarratives (see also Venditti, Piredda, & Mattana, 2017). These micronarratives, viewed in context and in sequence, formed a larger narrative. As for the isolation of text, we argued that since our focus was on Teen's positioning through textual status updates, this lens warranted a focus on those textual products. While we valued the multimodality of the medium, we were limited by our ethics clearance and by a lack of multimodality in Teen's use of Facebook in the first sojourn. We also recognized that how she positioned herself on Facebook might be a unique narrative in



comparison to other textual products she may have produced (e.g., a blog). Therefore, we felt confident that a textual focus on status updates as micronarratives was defensible.

These findings, drawn from the data collection, analysis and writing phases of the research reveal how we as researchers made decisions about working with Facebook to research SA. Further, they indicate how these decisions were sometimes revisited with the goal toward rigour in our writing and resulted in the added benefit of informing our understandings of methodology. The findings regarding our work with Facebook reveal the methodological decision-making we underwent for our original study.

## **5. Discussion**

Dressler and Dressler (2016) was primarily a study in which Facebook was the context (Baker, 2013) to study use *of* Facebook through observational data obtained by downloading user data. Secondly, the data analysis was supplemented by a reflection that can be considered self-report data and therefore data *about* Facebook use. Classifying Dressler and Dressler (2016) as one of “context” and “*of* Facebook use” demonstrates the terminology that has emerged from the literature as important distinctions.

These data were analyzed by drawing upon the theoretical framework of positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991; Norton & Toohy, 2011) and Pavlenko’s (2007) recommendations for use of autobiographic narratives, which allowed for effective analysis of the textual aspects of Facebook in this interpretivist study. In light of the social, interconnected, and dynamic nature of social media in general, and Facebook in particular, these frameworks served us well as they saw identity as dynamic and socially situated. These frameworks can be considered affordances to this particular study.

Recognizing ethical challenges, ownership was acknowledged through authorship for the participant researcher (Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014) and the analysis of photographs was limited to textual picture captions (Baker, 2013). Logistically, data collection and management were made explicit, but we recognize the importance of documenting the nature or the version of Facebook (Stirling, 2017; Kelly-Holmes, 2015). Noting the challenges in ethical decision-making and logistics provides researchers interested in using Facebook to research SA with important information to consider when designing their own studies.

Emerging from this study of Facebook methodology and specific look at Dressler and Dressler (2016), is a sense that the field of SA research is beginning to follow in the footsteps of research in other fields on the use of Facebook. We feel that now is the time for SA researchers to consider what guidelines might direct the field moving forward. We begin the dialogue by positing methodological guidelines for the use of Facebook to research SA.

### **5.1 Study Abroad Facebook Research Guidelines**

From our research on using Facebook as both a tool and context for SA research, we propose the following guidelines for the field. These guidelines impact the data collection, analysis and writing aspects of research and the theoretical, ethical, logistical decision-making necessary.

1. **Use and define common terminology when documenting methodology.** The method and type of data collection used can impact the conclusions that can be drawn from data. Thus, it is important for researchers to make the distinction between Facebook as tool or context, and within context, self-report data or observational data (see also Baker, 2013). In addition, terms such as “friending and screenshotting”, “downloading user data”, and “mining”, when used accurately and consistently, provide the precision necessary for

other researchers to profit from other studies. Some researchers are careful to include a glossary or define terms (Akkaya, 2002; Riley, 2013). However, in reviewing the studies for this research, we found ourselves contacting researchers personally to clarify aspects of methodology, in order to make comparisons between our study and theirs. While we noted early that there is no definitive academic source about the changes in Facebook over time, our conversations with other researchers resulted in the discovery of a Wikipedia page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Facebook\\_features](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Facebook_features)) devoted to documenting and defining Facebook features, that is useful for this research. While we recognize that word limitations in articles can impact whether this information is included, when it is included, Facebook research in the field of SA research is methodologically strengthened.

- 2. Document the nature of Facebook at the time of the study.** Since Facebook is a platform that retroactively implements changes, it is helpful for SA researchers to make note, and also report in research findings, the date range of data collection and a brief description of the features of Facebook available at the time of data collection (e.g., “Wall”, “posts”, “Newsfeed”). This description will facilitate data analysis, should Facebook change during the data collection time as well as provide a point of comparison for other researchers referencing the literature. An additional resource to strengthen claims researchers make about features in place during their study is Facebook.com’s Newsroom (<https://newsroom.fb.com/>), a searchable announcement page for changes to the social media platform. However, the responsibility lies with SA researchers to document the nature of Facebook at the time of the study, since claims about the platform impact the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. This guideline can be

applied to other social media platforms as well, although specific examples are beyond the scope of this paper.

- 3. Consider the theoretical, ethical, and methodological aspects of including visual media.** Facebook is becoming an increasingly visual medium with the proliferation of photographs and video. The sharing between platforms such as Instagram and Facebook only serve to increase the number of photographs that appear in one's Newsfeed. We believe that the inclusion of photographs in SA research needs to be dealt with theoretically by coming to some consensus as to which theoretical frameworks can capture the multimodality of the social media platform. Some interpretivist studies like ours used photographs as part of the data (Akkaya, 2002; Baker, 2013), focusing for the most part on analyzing the comments on those photographs. Most of the positivist studies we found analyzed the data by counting numbers of photographs uploaded or numbers of times an individual was tagged in a photograph (Back, 2013; DeAndrea, Shaw, & Levine, 2010; Kosinski, Bachrach, Kohli, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2014). Photographs hold the potential for much richer analysis through the use of multimodal theoretical frameworks.

Ethically, decision-making is necessary around the use of photographs for analysis and knowledge dissemination. With the changes on Facebook over the years, a user's Newsfeed shows posts of "friends of friends" and as such, photographs of people quite removed from the research participant could become a part of the data set. While most users might be familiar with this, and Facebook.com works at educating users about privacy settings, this lack of privacy has its greatest impact when photographs are moved from an object of analysis to an object of display at a research presentation or in an article. This concern is heightened when the content of the photograph is controversial, or

the people pictured are minors. In light of these concerns, it is our recommendation that photographs of non-participants be handled as follows:

- a. non-participant adults may be shown with faces digitally-altered, provided the photograph does not show identifying information and the content is not likely to cause concern.
- b. children may not be shown without permission from a guardian.
- c. criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of photographs is clearly documented and reported.
- d. photographs resulting from cross-posting between platforms (e.g., Instagram) are clearly documented and reported as such so that the constraints of the platform from which they originate are also considered.

## **5.2 Limitations**

In this study, we have reexamined our own research as a means of documenting and analyzing our methodological learning about the use of Facebook to research SA. This narrow focus is a limitation of the original study as only one participant who was also a researcher cannot be considered a representative sample. Ideally, we could have strengthened our conclusions by enlisting the cooperation of other researchers who have used Facebook to research study abroad. While we are grateful for those researchers who answered our email queries, we are left to interpret the affordances and challenges experienced by the other researchers. These interpretations are subject to our own biases, as researchers who have developed confidence in our own ability to interpret our experience with some objectivity, having taken a step back from the original study. Our small sample size involves potential bias and a lack of generalizability. Yet, we embraced this limitation as we felt the benefits of the retrospective, which included the

work of peer review and publication, could inform the field of SA more than a restricted look at published methods in other articles could afford.

Additionally, we recognize the challenges that would arise in replicating or expanding the original study (Dressler & Dressler, 2016) since Anja was both participant and researcher, a situation that is both a convenience and a privilege. However, replication would not be impossible. A larger-scale study would require that the researcher bring together (face-to-face or electronically) willing participants, have them log in to their own Facebook accounts to request data, have them personally cull the data down to the selected data range or give permission to the researchers to do so, and potentially involve them in the further analyzing of the remaining data set. Such a study might still rely upon a sample of convenience (e.g., sojourners from the same program or in the same country), but the large amount of data would provide a means to take an in depth look at multiple sojourners' experiences, as documented on Facebook.

## **6. Conclusion**

Revisiting the research question, "What are the affordances and challenges associated with researching SA using Facebook?", we acknowledge the many challenges that we, as other SA researchers before us encountered when using Facebook to research SA (see Back, 2013; DeAndrea, Shaw, & Levine, 2010; Stirling, 2016). Over the course of data collection, analysis, and writing, we had to make decisions and often reconsider those decisions with regards to ownership of data, the nature of Facebook over the two time periods of the study, the use of photographs, and the focus on the textual aspects of the data. We also recognize as affordances the ability to download large amounts of observational data and study the identity positioning of one sojourner's two SA experiences (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko, 2007), shedding light on the usefulness of Facebook for interpretivist research on SA.

The challenges of using Facebook to research SA serve as a call for the establishment of research guidelines in the field of SA. Although Facebook has been around for over a decade and some researchers were early adopters (see Godwin-Jones, 2016), using Facebook for SA research is in its infancy and further examination of research methods and ethical considerations will be needed as SA researchers expand their data sources to include Facebook and other social media platforms.

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<sup>i</sup> As in the original study, we have adopted the moniker Teen for the sojourner and reserve the use of her name, Anja, for references to Anja Dressler as researcher.

<sup>ii</sup> To avoid awkward switching between the first-person pronoun “I” for both authors, we will refer to ourselves in the third-person for this section, reserving “we” for references to work we did together.

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