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# When Home Videos Leave the Home: Personal Video Practices of College Students

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When Home Videos Leave the Home: Personal Video Practices of College Students  
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## **Abstract**

Personal videos, videos taken by common people to document their lives, are a ubiquitous and regular aspect of social life which remains strikingly understudied in Sociology. Bourdieu (1990) and Chalfen (1987) have both produced works examining the uses of personal photography and video in the context of families; and both suggest that video plays an important role in fostering group solidarity within families. However, as a body of scholarship (Van House (2011), Lange (2011), van Dijck (2008)) shows, recent shifts in technology (namely the emergence of camera phones and social media) may greatly alter contemporary video and photo practices. In this context, this study aims to understand the personal video practices of contemporary college students, particularly in regards to group solidarity and presentation of the self, through a series of eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Hamilton College students. The findings of the study suggest that technological shifts have expanded the uses of personal video to include presentation of self and identity formation. At the same time, however, the social function of personal video as a tool for solidarity seems to remain a central use of contemporary video. This study illuminates the uses of personal video by college students while also demonstrating the ways in which foundational sociological theories can be modified to help understand the modern, digital, social world.

## **Introduction**

From VHS tapes of a child's first steps to Snapchat stories of friends hanging out, personal videos have come to take a ubiquitous position in society. These records of moments in the lives of ordinary individuals are seemingly trivial on many levels. On one level, personal video making is seen as a process with little thought put behind it. And on another level, the

products of this process, the videos themselves, are seen as trivial and not worthy of deep and sustained scholarly attention. Despite their taken-for-grantedness, personal videos are unquestionably valuable to individuals. This is, of course, evidenced by the great agony that accompanies losing a collection of personal photographs and video in the case of say a fire or computer malfunction. Personal videos are often considered to be one's most valuable and important possessions. Personal videos are not simply confined to the domain of the individual, however. Personal video practices are social practices. Groups of individuals film each other, send videos to each other, and watch videos together. Personal videos are of sociological interest, therefore, not as artifacts to be decoded but as the essential element of an important and seemingly ubiquitous social practice.

The aim of this study is to understand the personal video practices of college age students. Specifically, this study aims to evaluate the impact personal video practices have on the presentation of self and small group solidarity. Therefore, this study leans heavily on the theories of Goffman (1959), Durkheim (1915), Collins (2005), and Bourdieu (1990). Because of recent technological shifts, namely the emergence of camera phones and social media sites, contemporary college students have an unprecedented ease of use for both filming videos and sharing them. Personal videos are diverse in their contents: from videos that capture traditionally important life moments like graduations, to clips of silly behavior of friends, to videos of a sunset. Videos can then be shared on a wide range of social media platforms: most notably, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Some recent scholarship has focused on the shifting use of personal video in relation to this new lessening of limitations. However, little scholarship focuses specifically on college students and how they make use of personal video in their social lives. This study, therefore, hopes to fill this hole in sociological

scholarship. Through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study aims to understand how college students utilize personal video (what types of videos they make, who they show the videos to, etc) and to place these practices in the context of the presentation of self and group solidarity.

The findings of this study suggest that the personal video practices of college students play a variety of roles in their lives. Personal videos are used by individuals as memory tools to aid in positive identity formation. Personal videos are not often posted online as conscious presentations of an idealized self, however, especially when compared to photos. Groups of friends take and share personal videos in order to capture and re-experience special or memorable moments within the group and certain videos can become important enough to a friend group that they achieve the status as a charged symbol. The ritual of re-watching these videos, or even mentioning them serves to foster group solidarity. This group social function of contemporary personal video points to a continuity in function to past personal video practices which were centered in the home. In short, changes in technology and society have expanded the uses and functions of personal video; yet, personal videos as a means for fostering group solidarity has remained throughout these changes.

## **Literature Review**

### *Introduction*

Personal video and personal video practices have consistently been overlooked as an area of study by scholars. This is true across a range of disciplines, from film studies to sociology. In recent years, however, a body of literature has begun to develop, particularly in the field of visual studies, around personal photography and video practices. This literature review aims to

synthesize this contemporary body of literature with older examinations of personal video practices, as well as classic sociological theory on relevant topics. The literature review will begin with a brief overview of the history of personal video practices, with an emphasis on recent technological transformations. Next, I elaborate on three uses of personal video that have been outlined by theorists: memory, communication, and identity formation. I conclude with a summary of two general sociological concepts that are of relevance to personal video practices: the presentation of self and group solidarity.

### *History of Personal Video and Recent Technological Shifts*

Amateur filmmaking has been around since the invention of the film camera around the turn of the 20th century. However, it was not until mid-century that it achieved a status as a popular and almost universal practice in America. Zimmerman (1995) locates the boom of amateur filmmaking at the crossroads of the post-war economic boom and expansion of leisure time, and the development and marketing of cheaper, more accessible film equipment. Zimmerman (1995) notes too that at this time amateur filmmaking became enmeshed with the ideology of familialism, or the prioritization of family relations. At this time the distinction between amateur film and home movies virtually disappeared. Children and family events replaced nature as the most common subject of amateur film. With this new family orientation, amateur, or personal, filmmaking reached a new level of social ubiquity and importance within American culture.

The twenty first century has seen the development and proliferation of new technologies which have altered personal video practices. The two major technological developments are digital cameras, specifically camera phones, and social media sites. Van House (2011) outlines a

number of different ways these technologies have altered practices of personal photography. Many of these changes can be directly applied to, or adapted to apply to, personal video practices.

The first shift occurs in the quantity, quality, and variety of videos. As video recorders on phones have become—and continue to become—more sophisticated, the image quality of personal videos has continued to rise. At the same time, the fact that camera phones are almost always at hand and contain a notable amount storage has led to an increase in the number of videos that people take. Correspondingly, as the number of videos have increased so too have the number and kinds of videos. While traditionally filmed moments, such as important family events, continue to be filmed, what is considered video-worthy has expanded to daily life. Seemingly insignificant moments, as well as spontaneous instances, are now put on video.

The second shift occurs in the convenience and speed with which videos can be viewed and shared. On account of smartphones' ability to access the internet and social media sites, videos can be shared (either by posting on social media or by sending directly to select recipients) immediately after their creation. The old lag time between the creation of a video and its presentation to others has been effectively eliminated.

The third shift is the increased publicness of personal videos. Personal videos in the past were usually private items. As Chalfen (1987) argues, home videos usually stayed within the realm of the family and the home and were rarely seen by outsiders. With social media sites, however, personal videos have become increasingly public and the audience for these videos has expanded immensely.

The final shift Van House (2011) outlines is in regards to the archiving of personal videos. As the quantity of videos have proliferated, the digital archives of videos often become

unmanageable. Because of this, personal videos in the digital age may become easily lost or forgotten. On the other hand, personal videos which are posted on social media profiles are effectively archived on those profiles for retrieval or rewatching.

In short, the emergence of camera phones and social media have made personal videos more numerous, varied, easily-shared, public, and easily-forgotten. The question remains, however, of how these shifts in personal video practices, meanings, and uses change the experiences of individuals.

### *Uses of Personal Video in 21st Century*

In response to the sweeping technological changes of recent years, scholars (Lange 2011, van Dijck 2008, Van House 2011) have begun to focus on the uses of digital photography and video for contemporary users. While the specific foci and arguments of scholarship varies, there seems to be a general consensus that there are three main uses: memory, communication, and identity formation.

### *Memory*

In the latter half of the twentieth century social scientists began to examine the social functions of practices of personal photography and personal video. Bourdieu (1990) and Chalfen (1987) both position personal photography a primarily a memory tool within the realm of the household. Because there was a correlation between camera ownership and having kids, family photos and videos were seen as family items and heirlooms. At the same time, photos and videos were usually intended solely for the consumption of family members or other close relations.



Bourdieu (1990) argues that personal photography serves a “family function.” It memorializes and expresses high points of family life (such as vacations, holidays, or important ceremonies) in order to reinforce the integration of the family unit, “by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity” (19). It is this affirmation of family integration or that is the essential point for Bourdieu (1990). He argues that this drive is why the desire to take photographs is felt most strongly during moments of intense family solidarity. He draws on Durkheim’s (1915) theory that festivities serve to revitalize and sustain groups in order to explain why photographs are so closely associated with festivities. By memorializing these celebrations, photographs can reproduce the effects of festivities to some degree. In a way then, the ritual of looking at photographs is a ritual with reinforces the integration of the family. As tools for memory, older family photographs even offer the unique opportunity to strengthen a sense of solidarity between younger generations and older (potentially deceased generations).

Chalfen (1987) views personal photographs and videos as examples of what he refers to as “home mode communication.” Chalfen’s (1987) theoretical centering of personal photography and video as a form communication is based on the definition of communication as “a social process, within a specific context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred,” (8). The specific context of home mode communication is, of course, the household. For Chalfen (1987) then, personal photography and video are means by which families communicate amongst themselves and with other close relations. The purpose of these communications are to showcase carefully selected aspects of family life (Chalfen (1987) uses the example that families only photograph smiling children not crying children) and to preserve and reproduce memories. In a basic way then, Chalfen’s (1987) understanding of personal photography and video is in line with

Bourdieu's (1990). Both see the images as means by which families can preserve memories and showcase the values they hold in high regard and the image of themselves they wish to put forth. Chalfen (1987) and Bourdieu's (1990) insights are still relevant today even though the previously discussed technological shifts of the 21st century have made the household centric view of their theories outdated. They highlight how personal photography and video can be used as tools of memory and how these memory tokens can produce solidarity (a concept which will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections).

The popular notion of personal photographs and videos is that they capture a critical moment and serve as tokens of the past. As Van House (2011) explains, "images are seen as memories made durable, correctives to fallible human memory," (130). While much contemporary thought stresses the constructed and skewed view that photographs offer of the past, photographs and videos are certainly still valued for, and used as, memory tools. The viewing of old photographs or videos can trigger memories associated with the represented event, time period, place, or people. In an important way then, images are valuable not simply as accurate representations of the past but as evocative tokens. Van House (2011) mentions that many individuals describe certain personal photographs as 'not very good pictures' but as important to them because of their association with particular times or people.

Van House (2011) and van Dijck (2008) also stress that in the age of public sharing, the function of images as memory tools is more collective and dispersed. In contrast to the familial archives outlined by Chalfen (1987) and Bourdieu (1990), there is now a dispersed storage of images which individuals can draw upon to elicit particular memories. For example, Van House (2011) found that certain individuals mentioned no longer feeling the need to document public events they attend because they know a plethora of photographs and videos will be available on

social media platforms. Yet, for others, it remains important to capture their own video of an event even if it will be filmed by many others, or even professionally filmed. This suggests that either capturing one's own specific point of view is important, or that the act of filming itself holds significance for individuals. Van Dijck (2008) highlights the fact that even images which are not consciously made in order to serve as memory aids can attain that status post facto. A short video may be filmed and then sent to a friend in order to communicate a specific experience in that moment; however, if this video is saved and viewed at a later time, it may trigger a memory of that moment and thus attain the status of a memory tool. This is a testament to the mutability and flexibility of the meanings attached to images.

### *Communication*

Neither the practice of personal photography and video as communication nor the theoretical recognition of this practice is novel, as evidenced by Chalfen's (1987) conception of the 'home mode communication.' However, van Dijck (2008) argues that in the digital age there has been a shift in the balance of the uses of personal images: from memory aids to communication tools, and from sharing memories to sharing experiences. In the modern context, images are often created in order to be sent immediately to others. The purpose of these images is not to capture a moment for memory preservation, but rather, to connect with others. At the same time, when these images are circulated it is not as objects, but rather as experiences. What is meant by this is that images are not meant to be long-lasting tokens of the past, but disposable communications of a particular immediate experience. Hogan (2010) notes that the purpose of these experiential videos is to 'get in touch' rather than to 'preserve a memory.' Lange (2011) uses the example of teens sending videos of themselves at a coffee shop to an absent friend. The

purpose of the video is not to preserve the moment but to share the experience in-the-moment, and in a way, *co-experience* the moment with the absent party. The immediacy present in this use of video is clearly tied to developments in technology. The previous lag time between video capturing and video presentation (and the lack of ways to share videos with distant individuals) limited how videos could be used a communicative in previous generations. This shift is most clearly crystalized in the social media platform Snapchat, on which photos and videos are sent directly to select recipients and promptly disappear after viewing. The difference between videos for memory and for communication thus lays in the intention of the individual producing the video. These different intentions can manifest in differences in content of videos. This is demonstrated by the increase of videos capturing more banal elements of daily life. It must be noted, and will be further elaborated below, that distinctions between videos for communication and memory are neither total nor constant. Videos can have multiple uses and these uses can change over time.

### *Identity Formation*

Personal videos and photography are integral to how one sees her or his 'self' and are thus linked to the formation of identity. Van Dijck (2008) and Lange (2011) emphasize the role personal photography plays in identity formation and note that its role was prevalent even prior to the digital revolution. Van Dijck (2008) calls upon Roland Barthes and his emphasis on the interconnection of identity formation and memory. Photos and videos of our past selves shape our image of our past selves, and in turn, our ideas of who we are. At the same time, photographs can be jarring when they betray the idealized image of oneself one holds. For example, a photographic image may reveal a further receded hairline than one pictures

themselves having in their mental image. Van Dijck (2008) claims too that people are easily led to create false memories of their past based on pictures. Apart from photos and videos of oneself, Lange (2011) claims that photos and videos which one takes play a role in identity formation. The choice of subject matter and the aesthetics of the image “communicates much about a person’s desired portrayal of their social self,” (27). In sum, photos and videos shape how individuals see themselves, particularly their past selves, and are thus integral to the formation of identity.

According to Stryker (1968), there are a set of premises which can help explain identity formation and change. The first two of these premises assert that (1) people wish to establish and sustain stable identities; (2) people wish to evaluate their identities positively. Personal videos seem to be able to aid individuals’ identity formation in terms of these two premises. An archive of videos capturing personal experiences from the past can serve as a tool to feel connected to one’s self in these past moments and thus serve as a connector between past and present self, stabilizing one’s identity. At the same time, these videos are most likely only of positive moments or moments individuals actively wish to remember, which would lead to a video archive which reflects positively on one’s own identity.

A point related to all three of these uses which Lange (2011), Van House (2011), and van Dijck (2008) all stress is that they often overlap. Lange (2011) in particular decries scholarly binaries which suggest images either are for memory or for communication. An image may serve any combination of the three uses depending on how it is deployed, and these uses may change throughout the existence of a particular image.

And so, we have seen how personal video in the current era is interchangeably used for memory, communication, and identity formation. The question still remains, however, as to

what broader social function these uses fulfill. It may be useful then, to return to Bourdieu (1990) and his proposition that personal photography fulfills a family function. While personal video has escaped the confines of the household (especially personal video of college students who have likewise escaped those confines), it still seems plausible that it may serve a function of small group integration and solidarity. At the same time, personal video has, as noted above, shifted from objects of an entire household and family to be more uniquely tied to specific individuals (this can be seen, for example, in the shift from family photo albums to individuals' Instagram feeds). It seems plausible, therefore, that personal video may be involved in the process of the self. More specifically, personal videos play a role in the presentation of self (Goffman 1959). While presentation of the self was certainly always present in personal video (the way individuals act and pose for the camera is a clear example), the context of social media introduces a new way in which personal video plays a role in the presentation of self. Because social media profiles are seen as extensions of an individual's identity, the content that is shared on them is an important element of the presentation of the self. The presentation of self and small group solidarity are thus two potential processes in which personal video practices may play an important role. The rest of the literature review will therefore focus on foundational scholarship related to the presentation of self and group solidarity.

### *The Presentation of Self*

Goffman (1959) is, of course, responsible for the most influential scholarship on the presentation of self. Goffman (1959) presents what is often referred to as the dramaturgical approach. Drawing metaphors and explanations from theater, Goffman (1959) explains how individuals present idealized versions of themselves. In order to present this idealized self,

individuals participate in the process of impression management: they monitor and tweak their behavior in order to selectively give and give off certain impressions. Individuals will perform different selves for different audiences. An essential element of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is that performances take place in situations bounded in space and time and involve face-to-face interactions with audience members. These two elements are of course missing from social media behavior and thus an adaptation of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is necessary.

Hogan (2010) offers an important re-application of Goffman (1959) for the age of social media. He explains that Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is insufficient for analyzing social media behavior because online content cannot be considered a performance in the sense Goffman (1959) uses. Because online content is not bound by time and space and is reproducible (able to be viewed time and time again), Hogan (2010) argues that they should be seen as artifacts as opposed to performances. For Hogan (2010), there is an important distinction between individuals performing, with conscious presence at the performance, and digital content (artifacts) which signify an absent individual. In order to analyze the role artifacts play in the presentation of self, he proposes the exhibitional approach. In this approach, he uses the metaphor of an exhibition as opposed to Goffman's (1959) of a staged play. Elements such as impression management are still at play, but instead of face-to-face performances in front of an audience, content is exhibited to an unclear audience at unknown and often uncontrollable times. Another key aspect of Hogan's (2010) theory is how individuals deal with the collapsed contexts of social media sites. Often content shared on social media is presented to a wide range of different audiences, to which an individual may present different versions of themselves. In face of these different audiences, Hogan (2010) argues that individuals post in light of the

highest common denominator. That is to say, they post only what would be deemed acceptable by the potential audience with the highest standards of what is acceptable. For example, if an individual is friends with both their college friends and college professors on Facebook, they would post in light of what the professors would deem acceptable. It should be fairly clear how Hogan's (2010) exhibitional framework lines up with personal video practices. Personal videos which are shared online are artifacts which represent the individual sharing them.

It must be stressed that Hogan's (2010) exhibitional theory should not be seen as a rebuke or dismissal of Goffman (1959). The theories of Goffman (1959), specifically audience management and impression management, are still resonant and important in the analysis of social media behavior. However, Hogan's (2010) distinction of exhibition vs performance offers essential nuance in the analysis of personal videos posted on social media. Certainly though, Hogan's (2010) exhibitional approach cannot be accurately applied to all forms of online video sharing. When videos are sent directly to a small group of friends for example, it could not be considered a form of exhibition. And so, while Hogan's (2010) theories offer some important frameworks for analyzing certain social media behavior, it is not an all-encompassing framework for online behavior. Many of Goffman's (1959) theories, on the other hand, remain relevant to all types of online video sharing. Impression management is particularly relevant. By posting or sharing a video, individuals are emphasizing a particular view into their life. For example, they could share videos of specific events or activities they participated in because they want others' perception of themselves to be associated with these activities. Or they might post a video showcasing them being silly to highlight their light-hearted side.

Of course, it should be noted that online sharing is not the only way videos are shared in the modern context, nor is it the only way that the presentation of self occurs. In fact, Van House



(2008) argues that collocated photo sharing (in person sharing) is still a frequent and important practice. Van House (2008) notes that in presenting photos to others, individuals participate in a performance of the self in the tradition of Goffman (1959). Individuals say certain things about the images and act in certain ways towards them in the face of a clear audience in order to manage an impression. In this way then, personal video practices can still be viewed through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework.

### *Solidarity and Interaction Ritual Chains*

The foundational basis of many sociological theories of group solidarity stem from the works of Durkheim (1915). In his social analysis of religion, Durkheim (1915) shows how social rituals serve the function of establishing and reestablishing group solidarity and group ideals. Durkheim (1915) introduces the concept of collective effervescence to denote the feeling of excitement and unity that a group experiences when coming together during a ritual. Durkheim (1915) also emphasizes that certain objects or symbols may become 'charged,' meaning that they become invested with importance which evokes feelings of group solidarity. These are what he calls sacred objects.

Drawing upon Durkheim's (1915) theory of rituals and solidarity, and Goffman's (1959) microsociology of face-to-face interactions, Collins (2005) developed his theory of interaction ritual chains. For Collins, (2005) rituals are not only the formalized rituals associated with religions but almost any social interaction. The ingredients of interaction rituals are, according to Collins, (2005) bodily co-presence, barrier to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood. Collins (2005) argues that the results of a successful interaction ritual are solidarity, symbolism, and individual emotional energy.

There are a couple different ways which personal video practices can be connected to Durkheim (1915) and Collins' (2005) theories of rituals and solidarity. On one level, videos can document rituals or other events of importance to a group. These videos can then be shared with members of the group who are not present (communication of an experience). While Collins (2005) originally claims bodily presence is a necessary component for interaction rituals, he does concede that videos or other forms of communication can offer a weakened ritual experience. Therefore, by viewing a video of friends hanging out, for example, an absent friend can still achieve some feelings of solidarity. Or, if an individual present at the ritual views the video at a later time, whether alone or with others, it may stir up some of the feelings of solidarity initially achieved by the ritual. On another level, the sharing of personal videos can in itself be a ritual. The ingredients of interaction rituals, particularly the shared focus of attention, are certainly present. The solidarity attained by ritually sharing videos may in part explain Van House's (2008) claim that collocated photo sharing remains important in the digital age. It is less clear, however, if online sharing can be an interaction ritual that produces solidarity since bodily co-presence is lacking and a shared mood is not guaranteed. In order to foster solidarity via online video sharing, it seems that some level of communication beyond simply posting the video is required. Some sort of statement about the feeling produced by the video can establish that the video produced a shared mood and was mutual focus of attention and thus may foster solidarity. In sharing videos, it is also possible that the videos achieve the status as a sacred object for the group.

## *Summary*

While personal video practices have existed since cinema's conception and have been a major social practice in the United States since the mid-century, the past decade has seen a dramatic transformation in practices as a result of the emergence of camera phones and social media sites. Originally theoretically conceived of as a way of memorializing family events, personal video has become more concerned with communication and identity formation, while still retaining its role as a memory tool. This triple use as a tool for communication, identity formation, and memory suggests that personal video may play an important role in the broader social functions of the presentation of self and group solidarity. Because of this, the theories of Goffman (1959) (though with slight adaptation for social media), Durkheim (1915), and Collins (2005) seem particularly relevant to a sociological examination of personal video practices.

This body of literature retains its importance when placed in the context of the personal video practices of college students. Having come of age during the technological shifts described above, college students have developed their personal video practices in step with the new technologies; for them it is not an unnatural adaptation of old practices to new technologies, but a natural development of practices alongside emerging technology. The literature suggests, therefore, that college students should be actively engaged in the triple usage of personal video as memory, communication, and identity formation. College students may be particularly conscious of the short time of their college experience and wish to document it for memory purposes. At the same time, college students are particularly active in online communication and videos presumably play a large role in their communication. The broader social theories that were discussed, presentation of self and group solidarity, also hold particular relevance to college student populations. The project of the self, while an ongoing process throughout one's entire

life, is often of heightened relevance and importance during one's college years. As students consciously struggle with questions of the self, their presentation of self takes on a strong importance. As part of a generation particularly engaged with social media, college students' online presentation of self is also especially relevant. An important question related to the presentation of self and personal videos is which videos are shared online and on which social media sites. Different social media sites present different audiences and the difference in videos posted reveals the different selves an individual tries to present. Small group solidarity is another process which is of particular importance in the study of college students. Removed from the context of childhood and adolescence (and thus removed from the family and childhood friend groups), students are forced to form new groups of friends. In the formation and maintenance of these friend groups techniques to foster group solidarity are essential. At the same time, students often wish to maintain their relations with both friends and family members who they are now separated from. Using videos as a means of communication could maintain solidarity with these groups that students are separate from.

## **Methods**

This study investigates the personal video practices of college students. The aim of this study was not just to collect data on and better understand personal video practices in a vacuum, but to understand the role personal video plays in larger social processes. This study proposes two main functions of personal video practices for college students: the presentation of self and small group solidarity. In order to study personal video practices and their broader significance, this study utilized a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with college students.

Research for this study was conducted at Hamilton College, a small, highly selective Northeastern liberal arts college in Clinton, NY with a total enrollment of 1,850 undergraduate students. The research was limited to the students of Hamilton College. Since a large majority of Hamilton students own smartphones with video cameras and the college provides extensive wireless internet access, Hamilton students are a particularly relevant population to study in regards to personal video practices in the context of new technological shifts. Hamilton College students are also pertinent subjects in relation to the themes of presentation of the self and small group solidarity. Most students are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, a time when concerns about the self are particularly strong and in focus; a large number of students also actively use social media. Small group solidarity is particularly relevant to Hamilton students because the college is 100% residential. Students are separated from their family and childhood friends, and forced to find and maintain a new ‘family’ or ‘families’ on campus.

The research consisted of eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one with students. While a survey could provide a shallow general overview of students’ behaviors, the aim of the interviews was to foster a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the meanings and attitudes attached to personal video practices. Specifically, the interviews were aimed at understanding the role personal video plays in students’ presentation of self and small group solidarity. In this sense, then, personal videos were the independent variable of the research and presentation of the self and small group solidarity were the dependent variables. It should be clear then, that the interviews were not singularly focused on the videos themselves, but on the broader social uses and meanings ascribed to them. The interviews were semi-structured for two reasons. First, a semi-structured interview allows for a more natural and comfortable exchange between interviewer and interviewee. Especially because of the peer

relation between interviewee and interviewer, an overly structured interview may feel forced and awkward and inhibit meaningful exchanges. Second, semi-structured interviews allow for unique and individual perspectives and experiences to be fleshed out because of the freedom and adaptability of the method, while the main structure of the instrument ensures that comparable data will be recorded across respondents.

Interview participants indicated a willingness to look over a selection of their personal videos with the interviewer. This is a methodological practice utilized by a number of researchers on the topic of personal photography (see Chalfen (1987), Van House (2011)). The logic behind this approach is that it is particularly useful in fostering specific examples of personal videos and the meanings that respondents attribute to them. Some participants were noticeably more hesitant to show their videos and instead pulled them up on their phones for themselves and offered a verbal summary of the contents of the video. While content analysis of students' personal videos would offer worthwhile and interesting perspective on personal video practices, this study did not utilize content analysis. Because the focus of this study is more centered on the meanings and uses students prescribe to their videos the research was focused on students' own 'analysis' of their videos. Some level of description of content is of course necessary for insightful analysis. General information about content of videos shown and discussed was thus recorded.

Data for the study were collected through eleven semi-structured one-on-one interviews with Hamilton College students. Four participants were recruited via an all campus email requesting interview participants, and an additional seven were recruited through convenience sampling. All participants were entered in a raffle for a \$10 Opus gift card. Interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and were conducted in academic classrooms and study rooms. The interviews were recorded via the audio recorder on an iPhone and subsequently

transcribed with the aid of an online transcription software. The names and other identifying factors of participants have been anonymized.

Table 1 in Appendix B presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. Respondents were predominantly male and upperclassmen. The homogeneity of the sample limits the opportunity to compare the personal video practice and attitudes of different demographic groups. However, the project is more so aimed at a broader application of sociological thought to a practice that, while widely performed and deeply social, has been overlooked by sociologists. Participants also exclusively used Snapchat as the social media to share videos and a majority claimed to be rather inactive on other forms of social media. While the exclusive use of Snapchat corresponds with personal experience and expectations, the lack of social media use generally limits potential insights into social media users and video practices. The use of Snapchat for video sharing and personal video practices removed from social media thus make-up the personal video practices analyzed. While other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, may certainly be used, the data suggests they are not the prevalent sites for video sharing.

Analysis of the interview data was done through a mix of inductive and deductive methods. Interview transcripts were informally coded in order to highlight and track certain thematic patterns across interviews. Due to the lack of sociological theory surrounding personal video practices, it was necessary for an inductive approach to be used. Based on patterns within the data, certain hypotheses and theories were developed which could explain them. At the same time, however, due to the wide scope of the subject matter it was necessary to utilize deductive methods as well. Deductive methods were particularly important in connecting personal video practices to the ideas of presentation of self and group solidarity which are at the heart of the

research question. Thus, the theories of sociologists such as Goffman (1959) and Collins (1987) were used as frameworks to make sense of the data. As these theories do not directly address personal videos it was necessary to use inductive methods to develop claims. The one sociological text which most covers a topic most closely related to this study is Bourdieu's (1990) *Photography: A Middle Class Art*. In the text, Bourdieu (1990) proposes a social function for personal photography which he termed the family function. The family function described how families used photography to commemorate and reinforce the integration and solidarity of the family unit. This framework was not directly applied to the data here due to a number of societal and technological differences. The data was coded, however, for instances and ideas which resembled Bourdieu's (1990) family function. For example, any mention of videos which are important to a friend group would be coded as related to the family function because they could be charged symbols. In short, due to the non-theorized nature of personal video practices inductive methods were necessary, but in order to focus analysis in relation to the research questions so too were deductive methods. While the choice of specific theoretical frameworks may obscure other phenomena which are at play, they were necessary to begin to make sense of the diversity of factors at play in personal video practices.

## **Results**

### *Home Video Roots*

All participants in the study not only reported that they use video in their lives currently but also that while growing up their families participated in the practice of making and watching home movies. While these home video practices are clearly distinct from participants current personal video practices, their families' use of video growing up is notable for a couple reasons.



First, it offers an opportunity to compare the theories of Bourdieu (1990) and Chalfen (1987) on family photography and video with the experiences of the participants. Second, it allows for connections to be traced between the older family video practices with the new emergent personal video practices of today. These connections not only highlight the discontinuities between the two sets of practices but also suggest a continuous social function of video.

Participants recollected that as children they were never the ones to operate the camera. Often, a singular family member would be responsible for most of the videoing within a family. In line with Chalfen's (1987) claims about family video and children, participants stated that they and other children were the subjects of the vast majority of videos. These videos ranged from capturing children acting particularly goofy or cute to simply record their common behavior. The other two main subjects of family videos were vacations or extended-family gatherings. Families would periodically gather together and watch videos from their collection. Participants reflected fondly on these communal watchings, highlighting how they allowed the family to reminisce together on particular memories and experiences as well as laugh at the silly moments they had captured. Many participants noted, however, that their families had not watched old videos together for many years. Most pointed to issues of technology as the main reason for this: videos were on VHS tapes and their families have no means to watch them currently.

Dante offers a specific example of a family video from his youth and how it became important and memorable to him and his family. He explained that his aunt would film home videos all the time and would often film him when he was a little kid. He described a particularly memorable and notable video his aunt took of him:

I was watching the musical Cats on a little TV and I was dancing along to it as like a three year old. And I'm dancing and there's this moment in the video where my face kind

of drops and it zooms in on my face smiling and I reach into my diaper and pull out my hand and you can see a little bit of poop. And then my face drops and the movie ends but it's a famous video in my family.

His ability to remember and describe this video reveals its significance to Dante and his family. The content of the video also highlights how funny videos of children are some of the most memorable and effective family videos. Dante explains that his family would semi-regularly gather to watch some of these old videos. He emphasized that his family loved doing this since most of the videos were humorous and it was always enjoyable for them to come together and laugh at the videos together. In terms of Collins' (2005) interaction rituals, it makes sense that humorous videos are so common since they present an easily identifiable shared mood: the act of laughing together produces solidarity. The fact that these videos are of the family itself is essential too. While some videos, such as the one described above, may be humorous to any viewer, many are only humorous, or are at least much more humorous, to those who know the subjects of the video. The insider status needed to fully appreciate the video thus further intensifies the solidarity of the group. This insider only aspect is furthered by the fact that family home videos are often only watched by the family itself and are rarely shared with outsiders. The video described above is notable too because as stated it has achieved a level of "fame" amongst the family. The video is notable enough amongst the family that the video itself may not even need to be present for it be used to foster solidarity. If the video is known well enough, it could simply be mentioned and the family could bond together over its humor. Here the insider status is even more necessary because one must be familiar with the video to understand the reference. While it could be said that it is the physical act itself which is being referenced it seems that in this case, and in most, the fact that the moment was videoed and rewatched is what allows it to become a common point of reference.

Overall, the family video practices of participants while growing up align with Bourdieu's (1990) theory of the family function of personal photography. Videos are focused on capturing family members and family activities and families ritually gather together to watch their home videos. These videos thus serve as ways to commemorate occasions in which the family unit is integrated and the ritual of watching the videos furthers the integration. A deeper sense of family solidarity is thus fostered through home videos, particularly through the ritual of gathering to watch the videos as a unit. The watching of these videos can easily be seen as an interaction ritual in which the videos achieve the status of a charged symbol. Even the focus on videoing children (and not special family occasions) is consistent with Bourdieu's (1990) writings. He claims that "photographic practice is more closely linked to the presence of children in the household (and more so the younger they are), because the arrival of the child reinforces the integration of the group, and at the same time reinforces its inclination to capture the image of this integration, an image which, in turn, serves to reinforce the integration," (26). At the same time, as Dante's example suggests, silly videos of children can become inside jokes within a family in which the video itself is no longer always necessary. By simply referencing the video, the family can share in a joke which can foster a sense of solidarity.

When asked to compare their current personal video practices with their family's home video practices, participants focused on the numerous differences. These differences (ranging from subject matter to technology to means of sharing) are well covered in the literature and will be further elaborated upon below. While participants did not touch upon the similarities between the two practices, some striking continuity and similarities are present. In short, while personal video practices serve a variety of social and non-social functions, the uses of personal video today are in many ways comparable to Bourdieu's (1990) family function. The participants of

this study did not, however, use video to foster family solidarity but rather to commemorate and further the integration of their friend groups.

### *Use of video today*

The centrality of the social element of personal video practices is evident at the outset of an investigation into these behaviors. This is because participants generally claimed that Snapchat is by far the main way they record videos. Snapchat is a social media app where photos or videos are taken and then sent directly to individuals or groups, posted as a “story” for all contacts to see, and/or saved to the camera roll. Amongst participants, videos are most often sent directly and are rarely posted as stories. Videos are occasionally saved, but often disappear once they are sent. Videos are also rarely saved but not shared. It should be clear then, that personal video practices today are based on a social dimension of sending the videos to others. There are of course instances in which the phone camera (not Snapchat) is used to record a video and the video is not shared. These instances point to some of the private elements of personal video practices but do not negate the overwhelming social use of personal video. In order to further understand the social functions of personal video it is necessary to investigate it step-by-step. Personal video practices can be broken down into five steps: deciding what to video, the act of videoing, saving or not saving the video, sharing the video, and further using the video after the fact.

### *What to video*

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that they most often used video to film their friends doing something funny:

I definitely mostly just look for funny things when I take a video. Like its usually a response to seeing my friends doing something I think is funny and I think my other friends should see. Sometimes I think the funniness is on purpose other times its not its like more of an embarrassing thing.

The first notable thing about this phenomenon is that personal videos predominantly feature other people, most often friends, as the subjects. This again is highly suggestive of the broad social dimension of personal video practices. It is also noteworthy that it is specifically funny moments, and not just normal moments, which inspire individuals to video. Viewed through the lens of Collins' interaction rituals it could be said that it is only interactions which are highly charged that are seen as suitable subjects for video. In instances where an individual is doing something funny, there is an easily identifiable shared focus of attention (the individual acting up) and shared mood (humor). Funny moments are some of the most common moments for friends which could be described as charged. It should also be noted that beyond not videoing "normal" moments there is an avoidance of moments of sadness or anger. While these are certainly charged moments, it appears that only positively charged moments are those which inspire individuals to video them. Why individuals wish to video these funny moments will be further elaborated upon in sections below. In short, however, individuals video these moments so they can share them with others who will find them funny and/or with whom they can rewatch the video and re-discover the humor of the video.

A danger with videoing funny moments is that the individual who is the subject of the film could be seen as the butt of the joke. Xavier verbalizes the thin line between laughing *with* and laughing *at* someone while talking about a funny video of his friend Abe:

It definitely feels like we're also trying to embarrass each other a little bit but that's also part of it. Which is a complexity of just a friendship. I kind of feel bad that Abe kind of looks really silly in the video that I'm referring to and he might not like that I find him like a subject or like object. So I don't know how he feels about that, it's very much for me to laugh at him. It's kind of a complexity of friendship like when does it become like

just kind of mean spirited or you know when should you ask someone to film them even if they're like a close friend.

Xavier recognizes that the solidarity that is produced amongst his friends through communally laughing at the actions of Abe in these videos may be based upon the exclusion of Abe. At the same time, in some instances the subject of the video may “be in on the joke” and wish to be videoed. It is important to recognize, however, that in some cases funny videos may foster group solidarity by alienating an individual within that group. Of course, an individual may change their feelings about being the subject of a funny video over time. While shortly after the video they may feel embarrassed, over time they too may find it funny and can bond with the group over its humor.

The overwhelming tendency to film funny moments could potentially be influenced by the popularity of *America's Funniest Home Videos* and the overall popularity of funny home videos as well as the now defunct social media site Vine. While these platforms certainly helped popularize the idea that funny videos are desirable and can be made by anyone, drawing a direct correlation between them and current personal video practices seems unfounded for a couple of reasons. First of all, as Dante's quote about the famous video of him pooping his pants shows, videos capturing funny moments have been a central part of personal/family video practices for decades. At the same time, a central element of personal video practices that differs greatly from *AFHV* or Vine is that the videos are of individuals who are usually friends of both the one taking the video and of the audiences shown the video. While the discussed platforms certainly showcase that videos of random people can be funny and popular, the trend found in personal video practices suggests that an important aspect of their appeal is that they are of known individuals. This trend connects back to Chalfen's (1987) point that home videos are only shown

to members of the household and select close friends or family. This is evident in the sharing tendencies of participants.

The tendency to video funny moments also fits into the larger tendency amongst respondents to video things in order to preserve the memory. The use of video for memory is, of course, a clear and well documented use of personal video as covered by scholars such as Lange (2011), van Dijck (2008), and van House (2010). Quinn offers a clear claim as to the connection between memory and video:

I definitely like to take videos because of how much I like looking back on videos and videos making me nostalgic. Like it both makes me nostalgic but also likes allow me remember things I might otherwise have forgotten.

While Quinn's quote does not explain the widespread use of Snapchat videos which are not saved, it does capture a key motivating factor in taking videos: the desire to be able to go back and rewatch them. His quote also reinforces the central role of humor in personal video practices. The relation between funny videos and a broader desire to preserve things for memory is elaborated upon by Xavier:

Yea I think these videos of my friends goofing off is just what's like the best part of college for me. And just like the fun and shenanigans we get up to is really what I love the most and I guess I just want some like proof or way to remember all that.

This quote reveals a central dimension of the personal video practices of Hamilton College students. Students time at the college is inherently limited and there is a strong desire to capture moments from their time there. Many participants voiced that it is their experiences with their friends that they value most about their time at Hamilton, and having videos of specific experiences with their friends is important to them. The widespread practice of videoing funny moments of friends can thus be seen as part of a desire to memorialize the friendships and great times one has in college. The use of funny video to capture a fleeting period of one's life can be

traced back as well to the preponderance of family home videos which focus on little children being funny. Both the goofiness of little children and the shenanigans of college friends are periods which will not last forever. Thus, a funny video of either can not only provide humor, but also be a lasting way to preserve the memories of those fleeting years.

Apart from funny videos, the other common subjects for personal videos are moments or experiences which are out of the ordinary. In general, mundane elements of a normal everyday life are not the impetus for, or the subjects of, personal videos. Thus, despite the fact that camera phones allow for daily life to be videoed, personal video practices remain consistent with older home video practices of focusing mostly on extraordinary moments. Some of the most commonly videoed of these “extraordinary moments” are trips to interesting locations: whether it be a quick day trip somewhere or an extended vacation out of the country. John vocalized this tendency in talking about some of his video habits:

The period in my life when I took the most videos was without a doubt the semester I studied abroad. I had the opportunity to travel around a lot of Europe and I was seeing so many amazing places and I wanted to document where all I had been and what all I had done. Like I did so much it'd be easy to forget about a lot of the places I went.

Here then we have a clear example of how individuals see video as a way to remember occasions they designate as worth remembering. Videos of experiences abroad were mentioned by a number of participants. Interestingly, Quinn offers an alternative type of video than John's:

This was in Amsterdam. And it was the kind of thing where I wasn't with people who I knew I'd be with for a long time. I was studying abroad there. I thought I'd capture this like kind of the people I was with at the time. Just a reminder for later on.

And so, as opposed to John's videos which serve to capture the places he visited, Quinn aimed to capture the people he was spending time with. But whether people or places, both videos serve



the same aim of capturing details of a certain fleeting point in one's life in order to be able to remember them at a later date.

In short, despite the ability to video basically anything at anytime, participants' reflections reveal a general trend of videoing a relatively small sample of things that happen in their lives. Most commonly, respondents video funny things their friends are doing. Otherwise, subjects of videos are often extraordinary occasions which individuals wish to be able to remember later on. There are certainly instances of seemingly random or mundane things being videoed, but most often these videos have a deeper meaning or context (often an inside joke) to those with whom they are shared. Overall, the general trends in subject matter are suggestive of a couple noteworthy elements. First, there is a striking similarity to family home video subjects: funny moments featuring close relations, vacations or other trips, and special occasions in general. The consistency of subject matter also suggests a level of video subjects being socially defined as acceptable or unacceptable. In particular, it seems that videoing has become not only a socially acceptable but a socially expected response to someone doing something funny or absurd.

### *Saving videos*

In Snapchat, the default is that any video taken will disappear after it has been sent or posted. One has to consciously and actively choose to save a video. The act of choosing whether or not to save a video is thus a key decision in the way the video is utilized. Most clearly, a video which is not saved cannot be utilized as a memory tool. Thus, while van Dijck (2008) rightfully points out the potential for shifts in the use of video (a video originally meant as a quick form of communication can later be used as memory tool) the realities of Snapchat use

suggests that this is much less likely. Understandably, participants claim that they only save videos they think they would rewatch at later dates. Thus it is in the moment right after taking the video that individuals designate whether or not the video will be available as a memory tool. Beyond being available as a personal memory tool, a video must be saved for it to be rewatched as a group or for it to most fully achieve the status of an iconic video that all members of a group know well and reference. The act of saving is thus an essential step for a video to most effectively be used as a tool for fostering group solidarity.

### *The act of videoing*

One issue on which all participants were in consensus is that the physical act of videoing alters the situation which is being recorded. This alteration occurs on two levels. On one level, the person recording distances themselves from the interaction. On the other level, those being recorded change their behavior due to their knowledge that they are being recorded. Respondents' consensus on this issue also extends to the fact that it is difficult to exactly suss out how the presence of a video camera alters behavior and situations. This is a difficulty that is not unique to the participants: questions around the disruptive effects of video cameras are some of the most persistent and challenging issues in documentary film theory. However, the coupling of respondents' insights and the sociological theories of Collins (2005) and Goffman (1959) offers a unique perspective on the issue.

A majority of respondents offered similar negative opinions concerning the very act of videoing. These concerns painted the act of videoing as negative in one of two ways: either as an invasion of privacy or as a stepping-out of the moment. John expressed his annoyance with how videoing can be invasive:

Well yea so say I'm doing something really dumb or goofy in front of my friends and one of them takes out their phone to video me. I do find that annoying a lot of the time. It's like "yeah I'm ok with you seeing me act like this but why do you think I'd want others to (see me like this)?"

Videoining can thus be seen as an invasion of privacy because it can entail a nonconsensual expansion of audiences. The notion of audiences here stems, of course, from the work of Goffman (1959). In this case, John is comfortable and willing to act in a manner which he considers dumb while with his friends. If the audience were different, say John was in a room full of potential employers, it is reasonable to assume he would not feel comfortable acting in the same manner. What is problematic for John in this instance is that by being videotaped he has lost knowledge of what audience(s) he is performing for. Thus, a performance deemed acceptable for an audience of friends may be seen by any number of audiences for which John may deem his behavior unacceptable. Because of the rewatchability of video, being videotaped offers the unique anxiety of the actions being seen by hypothetical future audiences. This can even include one's future self. Of course, in practice the potential audiences of a video are limited. John can reasonably expect that his friend will not share the video with his potential employers. Beyond the practical limits of potential audiences, a trust in the discernment of one's friends in regards to sharing videos can alleviate the anxiety of being filmed. Xavier explains why he does not find it invasive for his friends to film him:

Yeah I mean it would certainly make me pretty uncomfortable if my friends posted a video of me in public but I feel like it would be pretty out of character for my friends to do so. Like sure they might send it some mutual friends but they wouldn't post it on their story or anything.

Xavier's knowledge about his friends use of video thus dictates his conception of the expansion of audiences caused by videoining. He assumes that while the audience may expand to other close friends it will not crossover to a separate audience which could raise concern about whether his actions are suitable. In sum, the act of videoining expands the potential audiences for whichever

actions are recorded to an unknown number and types of audiences both in the present and future. This expansion of audiences and the uncertainty surrounding this can make individuals see the act of videoing as an invasion of privacy. The expansion of audience is also central to changes in behavior of those being filmed. This phenomenon is elaborated upon below.

That the act of videoing is invasive is not the only issue participants raised. Quinn offers the other major critique:

Even if it's not invasion of privacy it's kind of like they're stepping out of the moment which is OK sometimes but sometimes I'm just like you know kind of be here and not everything needs to be filmed. And we can just enjoy some things. I don't know where I draw that line.

This sentiment that the act of videoing removes the video-taker, as well as others who are present, from the moment was echoed by many other participants. This is interesting considering how inconspicuous phone cameras are, especially as opposed to old camcorders with viewfinders. While it is debatable how much the act of videoing removes an individual from the situation, and what it actually means to be “removed,” what is clear is that the act of videoing is seen by individuals as an act of distancing from the situation. And as Quinn’s quote suggests, this distancing is often viewed as rude, disruptive, or unwanted by other individuals. This makes sense when considering Collins’ (2005) theory of interaction ritual chains. A successful interaction ritual requires a shared focus of attention. Or, to use Quinn’s language, it is essential that all individuals present are “being here.” When an individual videos the interaction they shift their focus of attention. Even when they are filming the same interaction, other perceive that their focus has shifted from the interaction in and of itself to the act of videography. Thus, when an individual films an interaction, the interaction can fail. This explains the disappointment which can be felt when one begins to film an interaction that up to that point had produced a special charged atmosphere. This fact clearly presents challenges to individuals who desire to

film interactions. Several participants highlighted the problems they face in balancing their desires to both be present in the moment and to capture it. According to Bourdieu's (1990) theory of personal photography, events and interactions which are the most 'charged' are likely to be those which individuals most desire to capture. Yet, participants expressed that they feel hesitation about videoing events which capture their full attention in the moment. This paradox is thus at the heart of how videos are used to commemorate and reinforce group solidarity.

### *Sharing Videos*

Participants overwhelmingly reported that they rarely post videos on social media (on Facebook, Instagram, or as a Snapchat story). Rather, they share videos most often by sending them directly over Snapchat, both to individuals and to groups. Importantly, participants stressed that the reasoning for this, and their reasoning for choosing whom to send videos, is that they only share videos with people who would understand the context and fully appreciate the video. This most often means that if the video is of one of their friends they would only send it to other mutual friends. This exclusivity in sharing mirrors how in family home video practices the home videos would only be shown to members of the family or other close associates. It is suggestive of videos being appropriate only for certain insiders who would fully appreciate the video.

Participants reported that they rarely share videos with friends in person. The most common scenario where this in-person collocated sharing occurs is simply when a video or an occasion that can be shown with a video, such as a visit to a particular location, comes up in conversation. It is rarely a premeditated sharing. And no respondents reported having occasions with their friends where they sit down and watch old personal videos in a way analogous to the

home video watching they reported doing with their family when they were younger. Co-watching videos in person with someone is, according to the logic of Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory, the most effective way for a video to foster a sense of solidarity. It seems then that the lack of in person co-watching severely limits the effectiveness of fostering group solidarity in today's personal video practices.

*What then for the videos?*

If an individual has chosen to save a video, then after it has been shared they are left with a digital document to utilize in a number of ways. Most participants report that they will occasionally scroll through their old videos on their phone. This activity is most often done alone. Participants report that they enjoy the nostalgia that videos engender and that often they are reminded of specific events, moments, places, and even people that they had forgotten about, or at least not thought of for a long time. In this usage personal video seems mostly to be a personal memory tool and not serve any social function. It does seem, however, to play a role as a tool for identity formation in line with the theories of Stryker (1968). By re-watching old videos, individuals can feel connected to their past selves in past experiences which allows for a sense of a sustained identity through life. And as previously discussed, since videos are most often of positive experiences, re-watching old videos helps individuals form a positive impression of their identity. For example, John speaks about looking at videos from his time studying abroad:

I like re-watching them [videos from abroad] I think because I was doing so much amazing stuff, experiencing so many amazing things all the time. Like when I'm here at Hamilton I'm not doing anything that cool so it's nice to remember those adventures.

Here John is re-watching old videos to re-connect with his experiences abroad and to confirm to himself that, despite his current state at Hamilton, he is someone who is adventurous and has had what he deems amazing experiences.

Participants could all point to certain videos (not always on their phones sometimes videos of their friends they had seen and remembered) which were well known and referenced amongst their friends. These videos were predictably often funny videos. These videos though seem to have achieved a sort of Durkheimian symbolic status. They have achieved a level of importance to the friend group and can be brought out as a symbol (either by playing the video or, most often, simply referencing it) and used to foster a sense of collective effervescence. By all laughing about the video, or often recapping step-by-step what happens in the video, friends perform a ritual. This ritual is predicated on a shared knowledge of the specific video. An outsider of the friend group may not know this video and thus cannot participate in the ritual of discussing and laughing about the video. In one specific case, a participant reported that videos which had been often discussed and championed no longer are because new friends have entered the group who are not familiar with the video. Even if they have seen the video and understand the reference, if they were not present for its creation, or sent the video immediately after its creation, they may not have the connection with the video necessary for it to be an effective symbol.

### *Aesthetics*

Lange (2011) suggests that individuals can present themselves via personal videos through their aesthetic and stylistic choices. However, participants claimed to not put much, if any, thought into the aesthetics of their videos beyond making sure it is “not too shaky.” This is

suggestive of how videos are seen more so as strict documents of reality as opposed to composed and stylized presentations. Participants noted, however, that they often put thought behind the aesthetics of the photos they take, particularly the ones they post online. For participants, therefore, videos are not seen or utilized as ways to present oneself through aesthetics the same way photographs are.

While participants claimed not to consciously alter the aesthetics of their videoing, a few did note that beautiful or aesthetically pleasing things were sometimes the impetus for and the subject of their videos. In a way then, these videos can be seen as presenting oneself as someone associated with, or appreciative of, beautiful things. Many participants did state, however, that they would be much more likely to take a photograph of something beautiful as opposed to a video. Here once again photographs are seen as better suited for aesthetics than videos. Participants were also universal in saying that videos are unable to fully capture the beauty of reality. The common phrase used is that videos do not “do it justice.” The question arises then, what is the point of videoing beautiful sights if the experience of watching the video does not come close to approximating the experience of seeing it in person? One possible reason is the desire to present oneself as associated with beautiful things. This seems plausible for videos which are posted or shared with others. Dante, on the other hand, suggests an alternative reason:

I find the thing I like about taking videos of beautiful things is that it's kind of like motivating to go and do something else like that. So it's not that I see it I'm like oh I feel like I'm back there again it's like oh wow that was that was beautiful. I remember what it was like to be there. I should go do that again. I would say it's like a motivation.

A few things are noteworthy in this quote. First of all, it does offer an alternative reason for videoing beautiful things beyond an attempt at a specific presentation of self. We also see here how the video is not seen as a perfect document of reality or way to re-experience past memories but rather as an evocative token. Dante does not re-watch these videos for the experience offered



by the video, but in order to evoke his memory of the event. This quote is also notable because it offers yet another example of personal video practices that lack a social function. Highlighting once again that while much of personal video practices seem to be socially motivated, a great deal is also deeply personal and private.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to further understanding of the personal video practices of college students and to illuminate the ways personal video are used to foster group solidarity and present one's self. Despite limitations in sampling, both in diversity and in overall size, the study is suggestive of multiple notable social phenomena.

Bourdieu's *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (1990) is the best example of an in-depth sociological examination of personal photography practices in which Bourdieu (1990) sought to establish a social explanation for the uses of personal photography. Bourdieu (1990) claims that photography serves the family function and helps to commemorate and reinforce the integration and solidarity of the family unit. This framework of the family function was supplemented with ideas from Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory (which is similarly derived from Durkheim (1915)) and brought to bear on the data collected in order to understand how modern personal video practices of college students serve a similar social function in fostering group solidarity. Bourdieu's (1990) framework was, of course, never going to perfectly fit the subject of this study: Bourdieu (1990) was focused on photography which as we have seen differs in use than video, his work was written over fifty years ago, and his population was families not individual college students. A recent body of literature, particularly in visual studies, has highlighted the technological and social shifts surrounding personal photography and video in

the past decade and suggests radical changes from the family models put forth by Bourdieu (1990) as well as Chalfen (1987).

This study suggests, however, that despite the diversity of uses and functions of personal video for college students, it nevertheless serves a social function that fosters group solidarity, and is thus closely related to Bourdieu's (1990) family function. Consequently, Bourdieu's (1990) conceptualization of the bonding promoted by personal video practices is still evident in contemporary forms of videoing. The major group whose integration is commemorated and re-enforced by video for college students is not the family, however, but rather their friend groups on campus. This social group function of personal video is found both in the subject and use of the videos. Like in the family model reported by Bourdieu (1990), personal videos often capture highly charged moments: whether these be special trips or, most often, funny moments. Videoing funny moments, which could easily be dismissed as a trivial use of the video format, is, upon closer examination, a particularly effective tool for fostering group solidarity. One of the key elements according to Collins (2005) for an interaction ritual to be effective and thus produce solidarity is that there is a shared mood or feeling. Unlike other subjects, which may induce a variety or ambiguity of moods, funny videos, as long as they are in fact considered funny, foster the uniform and easily identifiable mood: humor. A shared reaction of laughter to a video is a particularly effective way solidarity is produced. Another reason funny videos seem to be particularly productive at fostering solidarity is the aforementioned paradox that the act of videoing can often ruin the charged atmosphere that the videoer is trying to capture. However, reacting to funny moments by taking a video seems to be socially acceptable if not expected. In short, funny moments are highly charged moments in which the act of videoing is an accepted or expected part of the ritual. The social function of video is

further evidenced by the use of personal videos. Videos are most often shared with those for whom the video is considered relevant, usually meaning those who are mutual friends with the people in the video. In a similar way to how home videos were usually only shared with members of the family, personal videos of college students are often only shared with members of relevant friend groups. The study also shows that specific videos, again usually funny videos, can attain an important status within a friend group: everyone knows the video, it is often mentioned, and mentioning the video elicits a shared positive reaction. Part of what makes these videos foster solidarity is simply that knowledge of the video can serve to distinguish group insiders from outsiders. These important videos can be seen as highly charged Durkheimian (1915) symbols which become elements of the essential iconography or knowledge pool for group members. It must be noted, however, that one of the key elements of the traditional family function of home videos is the ritual of collectively watching the videos. In person collocated sharing is much less common in today's personal video practices. Collective watching of videos would seem to be a particularly effective ritual and way for personal video to foster group solidarity that is underutilized. In sum, an adaptation of Bourdieu's (1990) family function seems to be applicable to the personal video practices of college students and thus personal video can be seen to serve a social function of fostering group solidarity.

At the same time, however, the study reveals that personal video practices of college students are much more diverse and multifaceted than an adapted family function can account for. One element of personal video practices which does not neatly fit is the notable number of videos which are shared directly over Snapchat but not saved. While they may be memorable enough to be referenced in the future, these videos cannot achieve symbolic status, nor can they be the focus of a ritual of a shared watching. Thus, while this form of personal video practices is

certainly social and communicative, it is far less effective in fostering group solidarity and does not neatly align with an adaptation of Bourdieu's (1990) family function.

On the other end of the spectrum of personal video practices are videos which are not shared with others but are exclusively used for personal memory purposes. This use of video is not social and does not serve to foster group solidarity. The emergence of personal video which serve as personal memory tools can be traced to developments in technology, specifically the proliferation of smartphones with video cameras that allow for the creation of individualized video archives. This particular use of video seems especially suited for college students. Removed from the family unit, college students have a much more individualistic lens with which to view their life. Once they have started their own family these individuals may shift towards a shared familial video archive. In short, however, the use of videos which are not shared with others suggests that there are psychological, or at least non-social, uses and functions of personal video.

The other main social use of personal video that this study focused upon was personal videos as presentations of self. Hogan (2010) suggests an adaptation of Goffman's (1959) theories for the age of social media which he calls the exhibitionist approach. In short, Hogan (2010) argues that due to the particularities of social media content posting, presentation of the self online is more similar to an exhibition than a dramaturgical performance. While possibly a result of a skewed sampling, this study suggests that college students do not actively use personal video as a way to exhibit curated presentations of themselves online. While it could certainly be applicable to narrow elements of personal video practices, Hogan's (2010) exhibitionist framework does not seem to be particularly effective for understanding the majority of respondents' personal video practices. That being said, there is unquestionably still many

elements of the presentation of self at play in personal video practices of college students and Goffman's (1959) theories are still applicable and illuminating in numerous ways. Individuals who are the subjects of videos are faced with the unique situation of performing for an unknown and unlimited potential audiences and may feel a sense of anxiety or uncertainty of how to act because of this. At the same time, the producer of the video is certainly presenting a specific version of their self whenever they share a video in any capacity. The gaze of the video camera is in some ways seen to be aligned with the subjective experience of the videoer and thus revealing as a sort of outward projection of inner experience. Or at the least videos offer insight into the places and people the videoer is surrounded by in a particular instance which can be seen as important presentations of self. In short, even when not in front of the camera (which is a clear performance of self) the person taking a video is still presenting themselves. The specifics of what types of videos suggest about a person and the decision making in deciding with whom to share specific videos (and thus present a certain vision on oneself) are key ways in which personal video practices are deeply tied to issues of the presentation of self. These were not, however, well covered by this study. This is due to a combination of narrow sampling, ineffective interviewing, and an analytic approach which became more focused on group solidarity. Future research would be well served to pursue this direction, however.

An important and complicated aspect of personal video practices is the paradox discussed above present in the act of videoing a highly charged moment. The goal of videoing the moment is that the highly charged nature of the moment can in some way be re-experienced through re-watching the video. Yet, the act of videoing itself seems to take both the videographer and others outside of the moment and thus weaken the ritual. This paradox would seem to make video less effective as a means for solidarity. One possible way this issue can be solved is that,

as mentioned above, in certain situations, specifically funny moments, the act of videoing can be an expected reaction and thus an accepted part of the ritual. This would suggest that certain moments are designated as socially appropriate to be videoed while others are not. Another possible explanation for how this paradox does not ruin the ability of video to foster group solidarity is that the ritual may get back on track after the interruption of the video and regain its highly charged nature. And since videos are often used to evoke memories of events, as opposed to directly re-experience them, the highly charged nature of the occasion can still be evoked by a video even if the act of videoing itself lessened the charge in that moment.

It must also be noted, that issues of race, class, and gender were not covered in any substantial way in this study. This is not because these factors are not applicable or important to an understanding of personal video practices. Rather, the small and homogenous sampling coupled with the theoretical aims of the study led to the exclusion of a serious grappling with these factors. These different identities certainly play a role in shaping what types of videos individuals make, different social groups would have different socially accepted or expected subjects for their videos. The relation between class and photographic subjects and usage is one of the major themes of Bourdieu's work. These different factors would certainly also be key in how individuals present themselves, both online and in front of a camera. These relations and others would be fruitful grounds for future research.

A related limitation of this research is the uniqueness of the research site. Hamilton College is a small elite residential college and a majority of college students attend schools very different in nature to Hamilton. The most influential unique factor of Hamilton College and how it effects its students personal video habits would most likely be the small, remote, and residential nature of the college. Students are removed from their families and friends from

home and thus must form new friend groups which serve as the core of their social life at Hamilton. This aspect of Hamilton likely fosters an environment where students are more actively engaged in group solidarity aspects of personal video practices. In reality, to understand how much this and other aspects of personal video practices differ between the Hamilton College student population and other student populations would require a more extensive study. A separate limitation in the methodology of this project is the role social desirability may skew the results obtained through interviews. Participants may have been reluctant to disclose video practices they consider potentially embarrassing.

The theoretical implications of this study suggest both the sustained usefulness and adaptability as well as the limitations of classic elements of sociological theory in understanding the modern, digital social world of today's college students. The interrelated theories of Bourdieu (1990), Durkheim (1915), and Collins (2005) on rituals, symbols, and solidarity have proven to be applicable to understanding how groups of friends utilize video as a means to foster group solidarity. At the same time, these theories prove to fall short in making sense of certain aspects of students' video practices. Most notably are the ubiquity of videos which disappear through Snapchat and which are thus only shared digitally. According to van House, and in line with the emphasis on bodily co-presence found in Collins (2005), these forms of digital contacts would not be effective rituals in producing solidarity. Yet this form of video sharing makes up a large bulk of personal video practices of college students. The theories of Bourdieu (1990), Collins (2005), and Durkheim (1915) can thus not adequately explain how online sharing of videos produce solidarity; they do, however, suggest that this form of videos is less effective in fostering solidarity than in person co-watching of videos.

The main practical information for college students about their personal video practices is related to this last point. Since in person co-watching of saved videos is the most effective means of fostering group solidarity, it would be productive for friend groups of college students to gather together and watch videos of themselves. This would be harkening back to the family video practices of many students' childhoods. More in person sharing of videos would restore one of the most effective elements of past family video practices without diminishing the new elements which have arisen with the development of technology and social media.

In sum, the personal video practices of college students are a diverse set of practices which require an array of sociological theories to make sense of. The findings of this study suggest that college students do not often use video, particularly as opposed to photos, as means to consciously exhibit or present an idealized self online. At the same time, however, individuals are often aware of the expanded potentiality of audiences that comes with being videoed and thus may become anxious or present idealized version of themselves whilst being videoed. The findings also suggest that, despite the massive shift in technology and the emergence of social media, the personal video practices of college students today serves a similar social function as family home videos. Friend groups use videos as means to capture and recreate special moments which in turn fosters group solidarity. At the same time, students also use for video for more personal reasons. Re-watching old personal videos is an important tool for identity formation in that individuals can feel a continuity and connection to their past positive experiences. In short, in relation to developments of technology and the emergence of social media, personal video practices of contemporary college students have diverse roles including identity formation and presentation of the self. And yet, even in the midst of these shifts, personal video still retains its social function, albeit in a modified form, as a tool for fostering group solidarity.



## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **I'd like to ask some brief questions about your family and home movies.**

Does or did your family ever make home videos?

What types of things would usually be videoed?

How and when does your family watch these videos?

How does watching this video make you feel? Especially how does it make you feel about your family and your relation to them?

### **What sort of things do you generally video?**

#### **Could you show me an example of what you would consider a typical video that you've taken?**

~Ok, could you now show me a video that's a personal favorite of yours?

~Could you show me a video that you haven't rewatched or planned on rewatching?

~Thanks, now lastly could you show me a video that you'd consider important to your ~friends?

A video all of you may know and talk about perhaps?

-Why did you decide to make this video?

-Who have you shared this video with? (did you send it to others? Post it online?)

-If you did post online, on which site and why? If not posted, why not?

-Did you have an idea of where you wanted to share the video before you took it?

-Have you ever watched this video in person with friends? Do you remember how they reacted, what they said about it?

-How often do you rewatch this video? Why?

-Could you talk about how this video makes you feel?

-If a stranger watched this video what conclusions do you think they would draw about you? Would these be accurate?

Thank you so much for sharing those. **Along the lines of what we were just talking about with that last video and your friends, I'd like to ask you some more general questions about you and your friends here at Hamilton.**

Would you consider your friends as making up a group?

How and when did you all become friends?

Do you think your friendships are based around any common interests?

What sort of activities do you and your friends partake in to have fun?

Are there any specific memories, specific events or moments which stand out as formative or important for your friends as a group? Do you or your friends have videos of these? If so, how often do you watch them and in what contexts? How do they make you feel?

Do you and your friends have any sort of group message (group text, a facebook messenger group, GroupMe etc.)? If so, do you send personal videos within this group? What types of videos? How do these interactions generally go? How do they make you feel?

If a friend is missing an event would you send them a video of it? (would you want to be sent a video of an event of your friends' that you are missing?)

### **I'd like to quickly ask some questions about any friend you may have from outside Hamilton, such as highschool friends or a friend from summer camp.**

Do you send personal videos to any friends who aren't at Hamilton?

What types of videos do you send?

What's a typical exchange around sharing a video? Do you talk about it with them?

How does sharing these videos make you feel?

**To finish up I just have a few final general questions about your use of personal video.**

When you remember past moments, events, or people which you have videos of, do you think specifically of those videos?

When you notice that a friend is videoing you do you feel it changes your behavior?

If hypothetically all your videos were deleted, would you be upset and what specifically about this would upset you?

Do you think about the aesthetics of your videos? (put in special care to make them look nice?)

Would you say you're drawn to video things you consider beautiful?

**Appendix B: Demographic Table**

Table 1:  
Demographic Breakdown

<i>Gender</i>	
Male	7
Female	4
<i>Class year</i>	
Senior	7
Junior	3
Sophomore	1
First-year	0

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