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Robards, Brady

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**Systems of Belonging: Identity, Integrity, and Affinity
on Social Network Sites for Young People in Australia**

Brady Robards

Bachelor of Arts (2006)

Bachelor of Arts with Honours (2007)

School of Humanities
Arts, Education & Law
Griffith University

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Abstract

Social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook play an important role in mediating the everyday social and cultural lives of many internet users. Young internet users were amongst the first to incorporate these sites into their everyday lives, and many young people continue to use them to connect and share with their networks, forging conventions and strategies for 'being' in online social spaces. For some of these young people, participation in these social spaces has become central for inclusion amongst peer groups. These sites offer a platform of mediated sociality that is distinct, while also manifesting in forms of interaction that are familiar and embedded in the everyday, blurring distinctions between online and offline, and troubling notions of public and private.

Drawing on qualitative data collected between mid-2009 and late-2010, this thesis charts the role of the two most dominant social network sites, MySpace and Facebook, in the social lives of thirty-three young people in Australia. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases: first, through gaining access to the profiles of my participants, observing interactions and exchanges on these profiles, and analysing content; and second, drawing on these observations to frame semi-structured, in-depth, in-person interviews. At the centre of the analysis of my findings is a focus on questions of identity and self-presentation online, and how the performance of identity in online social spaces represents a reflexive ordering of self-narratives that manifest in a 'digital trace'. I explore friending strategies, notions of integrity and authenticity, and challenge dominant conceptualisations of belonging that do not adequately encompass

the systems of belonging made visible by my participants on social network sites.

The implications of this research are broad. Early on in the thesis, I establish a theoretical framework for the empirical work that follows, drawing in particular on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework and more recent applications of the dramaturgical framework to online social spaces. Through the challenges I have encountered in this empirical work that informs this project, I call on future research that explores young people's use of social network sites to attend closely to the blurring of public and private in these spaces. I challenge researchers and institutional ethics committees or review boards to recruit appropriate expertise and literacies to the design and ethically reflexive execution of research projects involving social network sites.

In the chapters that draw directly on my empirical work, I describe a complex, dynamic and heavily strategic set of practices for 'being' in online social spaces that develop out of and work alongside the conventions that govern everyday life. I advance a 'systems of belonging' approach to better explain the mediated belongings described by my participants. This approach recruits existing theoretical models of belonging and combines them to make sense of broad, multiplicitous, coherent and reflexively ordered narratives of affinity and belonging. Throughout this thesis, I work to resist the online/offline binary by asserting the everyday, enmeshed nature of sociality in online social spaces. I conclude by again drawing attention to this argument, and by suggesting several trajectories for future research from this project.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Acknowledgements | 9 |
| Statement of Originality and Ethical Clearance | 12 |
| Publications arising from the dissertation | 13 |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 14 |
| Research Direction and Frameworks | 20 |
| The Internet: From the Utopic and Dystopic to the Everyday | 24 |
| Web 2.0? | 31 |
| Social Network Sites: History and Definition | 33 |
| Social Network Sites: An Australian Perspective | 38 |
| Chapter Conclusion | 38 |
| Chapter 2: Young Mediated Identities | 40 |
| Questions of Identity: Always-already Mediated | 42 |
| Fragmented Selves and the Crisis of Identity | 43 |
| Revisiting Goffman and the Dramaturgical Framework | 46 |
| Regions and Standards | 48 |
| The Idealised Self and Socialisation | 50 |
| Sign-equipment | 53 |
| Performances Versus Exhibitions, as Artefacts of Self | 58 |
| The Reflexive Project of Self | 60 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Conclusion..... | 64 |
| Chapter 3: Methodology and Ethical Challenges | 67 |
| Research Design..... | 70 |
| Pilot Study..... | 70 |
| Participant Selection Criteria..... | 71 |
| Recruitment..... | 76 |
| Participant Diversity | 77 |
| Profile Observations..... | 78 |
| Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews | 83 |
| Data Analysis | 88 |
| Internet Research Ethics Beyond a Public/Private Divide..... | 92 |
| Researching Social Network Sites and Young People | 93 |
| New Media, New Ethics? Undoing the Private/Public Dichotomy..... | 95 |
| The ‘T3’ Project and the Use of In-network Research Assistants..... | 100 |
| Friending Participants: Audiences and Context | 102 |
| Research Challenges and Solutions | 104 |
| Changes in Research Design | 107 |
| The Challenges of Being an Insider..... | 109 |
| Chapter Conclusion..... | 111 |
| Chapter 4: Integrity and Authenticity | 114 |
| To Lack Integrity..... | 117 |
| Privacy | 117 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Audience Segregation..... | 119 |
| Singular Identity | 122 |
| Devices of Identity and Impression Management | 125 |
| Encoding and Decoding Identity Performance..... | 127 |
| The Profile Picture and ‘Close Friend Capital’ | 131 |
| The ‘About Me’ Section..... | 138 |
| The Friends List and ‘The Wall’: Collaborative Identity Performance | 142 |
| Chapter Conclusion..... | 147 |
| Chapter 5: Friendship and Control | 150 |
| Towards Friendship..... | 152 |
| Social Ties and Social Capital | 156 |
| Privacy | 160 |
| Bedroom Metaphors: Controlling and Conceptualising Audience | 163 |
| Reconceptualising ‘Space’ | 163 |
| Symbolic and Practical Control | 164 |
| Context Collapse and Rethinking the Glass Bedroom..... | 166 |
| A Multiplicity of Friending Practices..... | 169 |
| Accepting or Rejecting Randoms: Low Levels of Practical Control | 172 |
| Investigating Before Friending | 175 |
| Real Life, Real Friends: High Levels of Practical Control | 176 |
| Friendship Hierarchies, Network Sizes and the Friendship Cull | 178 |
| Chapter Conclusion..... | 182 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 6: Growing Up on Social Network Sites | 186 |
| Profiles as Transition Texts | 188 |
| Researching Identity ‘In Process’ | 190 |
| Hiding Hijinks | 191 |
| Transition Experiences as Punctuated by Critical Moments | 192 |
| Broad Participation | 193 |
| Leaving MySpace, Joining Facebook: Functionality and Mass | 194 |
| Functionality | 197 |
| Critical Mass | 201 |
| Staying on MySpace to Avoid the Familial Gaze | 203 |
| Transition Narratives | 204 |
| Parents and Family | 205 |
| Chapter Conclusion: Transition Traces | 208 |
| Chapter 7: Systems of Belonging | 211 |
| Subculture to Postsubculture | 214 |
| Subculture Online | 216 |
| Within, Across and In-between Belongings | 220 |
| What is Subculture? | 223 |
| Re-thinking Neo-tribes | 230 |
| A Systems of Belonging Approach | 231 |
| Multiplicity | 233 |
| Everyday Youth | 235 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Combining Perspectives | 237 |
| Chapter Conclusion: Is there a Digital Generation? | 238 |
| Chapter 8: Conclusion | 242 |
| Limitations | 243 |
| Implications and Trajectories for Future Research..... | 247 |
| Inclusion and 'At Risk' Youth | 248 |
| Civic Participation | 250 |
| The Good, the Bad, and the Everyday | 252 |
| Appendix..... | 256 |
| Appendix 1: Interview Schedule | 256 |
| Appendix 2: List of Participants | 259 |
| List of References..... | 260 |

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To all these people, thank you.

Statement of Originality and Ethical Clearance

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. Earlier versions of sections of this thesis have been published under the author's name, as outlined on the following page. The basis of Chapter 7 was a journal article co-authored with my Principal Supervisor, Prof. Andy Bennett (countersigned below), but has been substantially re-written and extended.

The research reported upon in this dissertation was conducted with ethical clearance for human research as approved by the Griffith University Ethical Clearance Board (ART/10/08/HREC) under the supervision of Prof. Andy Bennett and Dr. Sue Lovell.

(Signed) _____ July 30, 2012

Brady Robards

(Countersigned) _____ July 30, 2012

Prof. Andy Bennett

Publications arising from the dissertation

Earlier versions of chapters in this dissertation have been published as journal articles, listed below, in accordance with the Griffith Graduate Research School guidelines on publishing during candidature.

Robards, Brady (2010a) 'Randoms in my bedroom: Negotiating privacy and unsolicited contact on social network sites', *Prism*, 7(3):
http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/Social_media/Robards.pdf.

Robards, Brady (2010b) 'Negotiating identity and integrity on social network sites for educators', *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 6(2):
<http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/IJEI/article/viewFile/700/528>.

Robards, Brady & Bennett, Andy (2011) 'MyTribe: Postsubcultural manifestations of belonging on social network sites', *Sociology*, 45(2): 303-317.

Robards, Brady (2012a) 'Leaving MySpace, joining Facebook: "Growing up" on social network sites', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 26(3): 385-398.

Robards, Brady (2012b – forthcoming) 'Friending Participants: Managing the researcher-participant relationship on social network sites', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In early 2010 at a chain café in one of the less affluent suburbs of Australia's Gold Coast¹, I'm struck by the fact that Cody², the 21-year-old I'm sitting across from, is 'on' Facebook as we talk. He skims through his newsfeed on his BlackBerry as seamlessly and effortlessly as he sips his coffee, while I ask him about how he decides who to friend³ on Facebook and why and when he stopped using MySpace. This practice of co-presence doesn't appear to be disruptive for him, no more so than the music in the background or the newspaper on the table next to us. He glances at his phone as someone else may glance at their watch. I can't quite tell whether his constant 'checking' of his Facebook feed is a nervous habit, or perhaps it's just that half an hour into the interview I'm starting to bore him. When I ask him what he's doing on his phone between questions he laughs nervously and apologises, suddenly all too aware of the social conventions that are disturbed by this form of co-presence. Is he in a café with me, or is he 'on' Facebook, talking to his friends? How does he manage this prospect?

In lecture theatres and in bedrooms, on the bus and at the pub, social network sites such as MySpace and the more recent and more widely adopted Facebook have become important spaces for mediated sociality. These sites, constituted by the user-generated profiles that form the networks, are key social and cultural spaces that offer important insights into contemporary society. The rise of smart-phones such as the BlackBerry and the iPhone has rendered

¹ The Gold Coast is situated in the middle of Australia's East coast. See Chapter 3 for more on the Gold Coast.

² Names of participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

³ As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 5, I use the word 'friend' in a variety of ways. Here, it is a verb, pointing to the process of 'friending' another user on a social network site. I also capitalise the terms Friend and Friendship in places to denote a specific category on MySpace and Facebook.

these sites ubiquitous, accessible everywhere a wireless internet or cellular connection is present. Not all young users of social network sites are as actively engaged as Cody. Some only access their account(s) once or twice per week, or perhaps even less frequently. For the majority, however, social network sites have become integrated into everyday social practices, and for many young people, participation on these sites has become as important as owning a mobile phone for socialising with peers and other members of their networks. As I will argue, social network sites provide a terrain from which scholarship on contemporary forms of belonging, especially amongst young people, can be further theorised and understood.

As Hine (2000: 3) explains, the internet, in one sense, is simply 'a way of transmitting bits of information from one computer to another', but it is also much more. This project investigates how young people living in Australia who were born between 1982 and 1994 engage with and thus produce social network sites, the most popular of these sites at the time of the fieldwork (2009-2010) being MySpace and Facebook. Participation in these spaces is made possible by the construction of personal profiles that constitute these networks. As I will argue, these profiles are at once performative and reflexively generative. That is, the act of creating a profile not only requires the performance of an identity or identities, but it also requires that the user reflects upon and organises their identity-project in alignment with (or, in some cases, in opposition to) the profile's form: a profile picture, an autobiographical 'about me' section, a list of interests, a list of contacts or 'Friends' and so on. Thus, this thesis will be initially focussed on the ways in which identities are produced, managed and interconnected on social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. From this foundation, I will then move on to consider how identities

are fundamentally situated within, in-between and across what I will refer to as 'systems of belonging'. As I will argue, this term describes the interrelated, multiple and at times contradictory or competing forms of belonging that young people produce, articulate and inhabit online, often expressed as networks, friendship circles, groups, communities, subcultures, lifestyles, scenes, and so on. In the penultimate chapter, Chapter 7, I will explore why the theorisation of belonging for young people requires ongoing revision, especially in a context where the ways in which these 'systems of belonging' are increasingly mediated by social technologies.

While frameworks and notions of the 'virtual community' (Rheingold 1994) and the 'global village' (McLuhan 1962) have provided useful positions from which to imagine forms of online sociality, they do not adequately describe the fluid, dynamic and yet often coherent systems of belonging that young people at once inhabit and produce, transcendent of the online/offline dichotomy. Similarly, frameworks with long-standing traditions in sociology and in cultural studies such as 'youth subculture' (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976; Hebdige 1979) fail to adequately address the complexity of belonging experienced (or not experienced) and enacted by everyday young people who blend physical, offline presences with more highly mediated forms of online presence and who do not conform to the more visible and rigid subcultural groupings such as goth (Hodkinson 2002a) or straight edge (Haenfler 2009, 2010). Even recent, post-subcultural debates that advance more contemporary models of belonging such as the tribe or the neo-tribe (Maffesoli 1996; Bennett 1999) lack a rigorous consideration of how online forms of sociality necessitate ongoing revision of any understanding of how young people imagine, enact, inhabit, produce and make visible their systems of belonging. This research seeks to address this

lack through empirical research that explores how everyday young people's identities are mediated and situated in online social spaces. Thus, the following research questions drive this project:

1. What is the role of social network sites in the social lives of young people in Australia?
2. Are young people forming new networks and systems of belonging online or are they using social network sites to articulate existing, offline networks?
3. What are the mechanisms and social conventions young people use and operate within (or against) in online social spaces? Are these new conventions or do they build upon the conventions that govern offline forms of social interaction?
4. How do young people demonstrate a sense of belonging online? Are concepts like 'community' and 'subculture' useful for understanding online forms of belonging amongst young people?

In Chapter 2 I set out a theoretical framework around identity as reflexively learned and constructed, fluid, multiplicitous, and situated performance. I then apply this approach to the construction and deployment of identity on the internet, focussing specifically on social network sites. In Chapter 3 I detail my methodology, explaining methods for recruitment and data collection, while also entering into a broader debate in the literature concerned with the ethical conduct of 'internet research' involving young people.

In Chapters 4 to 7, I advance the threads I have signalled in the first three chapters through a discussion of my findings. Chapter 4 focuses on the tension inherent between the presentation of an 'idealised self' (Goffman 1959) and the

presentation of an authentic and coherent self, focussing on the strategies my participants have developed to negotiate this tension. This chapter also resists implications such as those advanced by Facebook's creator and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg (in Kirkpatrick 2010), that identities must be singular and transparent in order to be imbued with a sense of integrity. Rather, I demonstrate that many young people are developing clear strategies for managing complex, multi-faceted forms of identity based on the systems of belonging they produce, articulate and inhabit. Although containing multiple and even contradictory elements, these identity projects are often described by participants in coherent ways, often played out through a process of audience segregation and impression management.

Chapter 5 unpacks the strategies by which my participants exert a sense of control over their online spaces: their profiles. In this chapter I discuss what constitutes 'Friendship' on social network sites for my participants, and how the criteria that determine who to 'Friend' can be understood as strategies for audience management within Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework. Consistent with boyd (2008a: 134), I capitalise the term Friend to differentiate between the category used on social network sites (which collapses family, acquaintances, colleagues and so on into a single grouping) from more traditional forms of friendship often associated with a heightened sense of affinity, familiarity and/or intimacy. While social network sites collapse these broad networks of contacts into a the singular category of Friend, thus conflating perceived audiences into a single performative medium, I will argue that the young users of these sites are developing strategies for managing and even subverting that conflation.

In Chapter 6, I consider participation on social network sites as increasingly mandatory for young people. For some of the young people in this study, large parts of their social lives have been played out on these sites. I explore the shift from one site (MySpace) to another (Facebook) through the notion of the 'digital trace' (Bowker 2007), generated by participation on these sites (creating profiles, uploading images, commenting on pages and so on) as representing a key mechanism by which young people's transition narratives can be made accessible and visible amongst their network.

Chapter 7, the penultimate chapter, critiques typologies of belonging that fail to adequately account for the multiple contemporary forms of belonging that young people experience, especially in a social context that is often mediated by online forms of sociality. In this section I trace subcultural studies from the Chicago School's focus on deviance through to the Birmingham CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) approach, concerned more with style, eventually arriving at the post-subcultural debate and an alternative model of belonging: the neo-tribe. While I signal that the concept of the neo-tribe is useful, I also discuss its limitations. A more effective conceptualisation of belonging must also consider how online forms of sociality render belonging for young people as unique from the groupings of young people studied previously. Thus, I propose a new approach that recognises the multiple systems of belonging that young people produce, articulate and inhabit, occurring through a dynamic process of highly mediated synchronous and asynchronous co-presences.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I draw these threads together in the conclusion. This chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations of the research, the place of this research in the context of international research on young people and social

network sites, while also considering trajectories for future research. In the remainder of this introductory chapter I establish a series of frameworks for the research: from the disciplinary (cultural sociology) to the analytic and applied (subcultural studies and symbolic interactionism).

Research Direction and Frameworks

Early in the research design, this project had two paths. The first path was concerned with 'the culture' of social network sites, which would have considered sites like MySpace and Facebook from the top down. While this research is important and valuable (see, for example, Raynes-Goldie 2010) this is not the trajectory my own research has taken. Rather, this project took a second path, focussing on the individuals that use these sites. Just as Miller (2011) set out to undertake an ethnographic examination of a particular population in Trinidad, rather than a study of Facebook more generally, my own research also focuses on a particular group of people – young people living on Australia's Gold Coast – who integrate social network sites into their everyday lives. In this respect, my research takes the form of a micro-level sociological investigation.

Sociology as a discipline has provided the most effective frameworks for understanding these sites at the level of the 'social individual'; at once the bearer and agent of society while also the subject of its structural forces (Giddens 1991). While there are structural factors at play in this ethnography, such as Facebook's policies on privacy and broader popular discourse around young people and new media, they are not at its core.

This project seeks to understand how young people express a sense of self online and how that self manifests and is situated. MySpace and Facebook,

then, serve as both locations (although my interviews are conducted offline, in-person) and as examples, in the same way that Chicago served as a location and as an example in Thrasher's (2005[1927]) ground-breaking research on gangs which is often attributed as the beginning of subcultural studies⁴. While MySpace and Facebook are important locations that will warrant a great deal of attention, they are secondary in this thesis to the users that constitute them and the social strategies these users develop to produce, articulate and inhabit the systems of belonging these sites mediate. Individual sites can rise and fall in reach and popularity over a few short years, but tracing the conventions and strategies by which individuals present a sense of identity and belonging in online social spaces has a much longer trajectory.

In Thrasher's research, it was necessary to describe Chicago and all of its interstices in great detail, and yet it was the people that constituted the city. While MySpace and Facebook act as social structures that in some ways govern and exert power over their users, it is the users who actually produce, inhabit and in many cases police these networks, and thus the users and the strategies and conventions they develop to constitute these networks must be at the core of this research.

While theoretical frameworks will be developed in the chapters that follow, some general context to describe where this research sits in disciplinary terms may also be useful. This thesis can be situated broadly across two disciplines: first, the tradition of sociology, or to be more specific, a form of sociology that emerged after the 'cultural turn' (Chaney 1994) that is best described as cultural sociology; and second, cultural studies. While youth studies and early

⁴ Although he did not use the term, his work on groups of young delinquent men was the foundation of later work on youth subculture in the Chicago School.

subcultural studies are often framed in sociological terms, more contemporary subcultural studies, identity studies, internet research and the study of digital culture are often described as or fall within the remit of cultural studies.

As I will discuss in more depth in Chapter 2, I have drawn on the paradigm of symbolic interactionism within sociology, primarily through the work of Goffman (1959) to consider the presentation of self as an everyday and highly mediated process. While Goffman's dramaturgical model has been deployed in the study of online identity at some length in the past decade (Miller 1995; Barnes 2000; boyd 2006; Pearson 2009), many of these applications of Goffman's theories have only been exploratory, cursory, or theoretical, rarely informed by empirical research or a sustained application. In revisiting these cases and in applying Goffman's dramaturgical framework to my own findings, I intend to use this foundation as a framework from which a more substantial argument around identity and belonging can be developed. Subsequently, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, I have found it useful to borrow from and contribute to the tradition of subcultural studies. This field emerges from the sociological tradition in the Chicago School in the 1920s, but is realised more fully through the cultural studies approach of the Birmingham CCCS adaptation in the 1970s through to early-1990s (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976; Hebdige 1979; Redhead 1990, 1993; McRobbie & Garber 1991) and is subsequently challenged by post-subculturalists in the late-1990s (Muggleton 1997; Bennett 1999).

In discussing the Chicago School's early contribution to the development of subcultural studies, Jenks (2005: 54) notes that the great contribution of Chicago School sociologists was their 'detailed understanding of the typical features of individual human action [...] the explanation of meaningful social

interaction [...] meaningful in the sense of being intentional or having a purpose'. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, it is this micro-level sociological approach that has driven the empirical research reported here. In addition to the wealth of data I have gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I will also be reporting on data from discourse analyses of my participants' profiles and the deconstruction of semiotic events on these pages. While these approaches to research are informed by a cultural studies framework, they can also be aligned with a form of participant-observation in the sociological tradition. As such, this project will be guided by symbolic interactionism as a sociological framework, while working to interrogate both subcultural and more recently advanced post-subcultural paradigms (lifestyles/lifestyle movements, scenes, neo-tribes) as conceptual models used for understanding belonging and sociality for young people.

This project has also taken shape during a period of perceived 'convergence' between two traditionally opposed approaches to youth studies: on one side is the 'transitions' approach, largely concerned with transitions from education to employment and informed by large-scale quantitative studies; while on the other side is the 'cultural' approach, concerned with more locally situated practices and symbolic exchanges, informed by small-scale ethnographic research (Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011). While Furlong, Woodman and Wyn argue for a new 'social generation' approach, informed in part by Mannheim's (1952) work on generations, which unites these two approaches, I would argue that each tradition brings an importantly unique perspective to understanding young lives. While the 'social generation' approach may become a useful conceptual framework as it is developed, this project is clearly positioned within the 'cultural' tradition of youth studies, in both its interest in a local set of practices

(albeit with broader implications) and in its qualitative methodological approach. However, literature from what might be referred to as the 'transitions' tradition has been immensely useful in framing this project, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 6.

The Internet: From the Utopic and Dystopic to the Everyday

Installed into the daily lives of individuals across the globe, the internet has become a medium of communication, utility, information dissemination and social interaction. Communication and social interaction should be understood separately, whereby the latter is more complex than the exchange of emails or instant messages. Especially for young people, 'in the vanguard of social networking practices' (Livingstone 2008: 394), social interaction on the internet has become saturated with cultural cues and is subject to still-emerging conventions around everyday practices, behaviours and expectations. Documenting these practices is a central aim of this project.

As a social phenomenon, the internet has had a powerful and lasting impact on the configuration and operation of society, at least in parts of the world where the internet is available. The digital divide, the gulf between those who have regular access to the internet and those who don't, is still wide. Although this gap is slowly closing, discussions on the broad scope and impact of the internet often overplay perceptions of access: 30.2 per cent of the global population are internet users (*Internet World Statistics* 2011). In developed nations, this percentage is much higher. In New Zealand, 83.9 per cent of the population are internet users, in the UK 82 per cent, South Korea 81.1 per cent, Australia 80.1 per cent, Japan 78.4 per cent, Canada 77.7 per cent and USA 77.3 per cent (*Internet World Statistics* 2011). Within developed nations, the

digital divide is now often measured in terms of internet speed rather than absolute access (Green 2010: 66-78), signalling new forms of inequality.

In reflecting upon the profound importance of the internet, Weinberger notes that 'the Web gives us an opportunity to rethink many of our presuppositions about our nature and our world's nature' (2002: xii). The internet challenges fundamental notions such as knowledge, space, power, time, self, and belonging. Like Weinberger, Bowker (2007: 21) contends that the widespread adoption of the internet has been as critical as the advent of the printing press and the development of written records, although its potential, in many ways, may even exceed these paradigmatic shifts. The notion of the 'global village', first imagined by McLuhan (1962) in the 1960s and (as some would argue) fully realised in the early 1990s with the widespread adoption of the internet, still persists as a powerful metaphor. However, as the internet is increasingly embedded into everyday life – the site upon which the interplay between culture and structure takes place, where 'society is fashioned' (Bennett 2005: 1) – the boundless, utopic optimism and the ethereal qualities of the global village are diminished. Instead, the politics of the everyday, concerned with issues of identity and belonging become a key concern for the average internet user.

Since the early 1990s, internet studies scholarship has been a strong, interdisciplinary tradition. As I frame usage of social network sites in 'everyday' terms, in this section I will briefly trace the shift in the study of identity on the internet from both utopic and dystopic conceptualisations of the internet, which set the internet aside from (or outside of) everyday, offline, 'real' life through to more contemporary scholarship that draws attention to the embedded, everyday nature of the internet. I contend that this is an important shift to highlight given that adoption of the internet has spread so widely since internet studies

scholarship began. In the decade from 2001 to 2011 alone, for example, there has been a 480.4 per cent growth in internet users (*Internet World Statistics* 2011). This shift has had a fundamental effect on perception and usage as it has entered into an everyday, increasingly banal context. Subsequently, online spaces that require a performance of identity have undergone a similar transformation from the experimental and utopic through to the everyday and the common.

As a medium, the internet was often framed as an 'identity laboratory' (Wallace in Jordon 2005: 4) in early internet studies scholarship, where the individual experimented with aspects of self. McRae, for example, asserts that online, individuals can remake themselves according to their choosing. Her research indicated a 'freedom of expression, of physical presentation and of experimentation beyond one's own real-life limits' (McRae 1997: 75). McRae's research centred on 'MUDs' (Multi-User Domains): text based environments where users are able to role-play as anything from themselves to dwarves through to giant queer lions and creatures with malleable genders. McRae notices that when markers of identity become an option or a point of description rather than a strictly defined biological or social construct, they can (and will) be subverted (McRae 1997: 79).

Turkle's (1995; 2001) early contributions to identity studies on the internet are evident in the overall development of the field, and her work continues to be regularly cited as key to the development of online identity studies as a scholarly discipline. Turkle also understood the internet to be a place of identity-play, where users could experiment with and perform different versions of self. Channelling Goffman's dramaturgical theory of identity performance, one of Turkle's interviewees described online identity play as a 'chance for all of us

who aren't actors to play [with] masks [...] and think about the masks we wear every day' (1995: 256). As with McRae, Turkle was investigating the performance of identities primarily in MUDs where participants would often role-play as characters in a specific context, sometimes moving between characters.

Dibbell (1998) provides a useful introduction to MUDs through an era-typical discourse as he discusses his visits to 'LambdaMOO' a popular MUD in the early 1990s:

Some years ago – let's say about halfway between the first time you heard the words information superhighway and the first time you wished you never had – I found myself tripping now and then down the well-travelled information lane that leads to LambdaMOO, a very large and very busy rustic mansion built entirely of words. On the occasional free evening I'd sit down in my New York City apartment and type the commands that called those words onto my computer screen, dropping me with what seemed a warm electric thud inside the house's darkened coat closet, where I checked my quotidian identity, stepped into the persona and appearance of a minor character from a long-gone television sitcom, and stepped out into the glaring chatter of the crowded living room. Sometimes, when the mood struck me, I emerged as a dolphin instead.

(Dibbell 1998: 11-12)

Dibbell's experiences here give a context for the work done by the likes of McRae and Turkle. The notion of a place, a body and an experience conjured up through keystrokes may at once seem fantastical and yet also very familiar – this is, after all, how fiction has always operated. LambdaMOO can be understood, then, as a story that is never finished, where the characters are never pinned down and where the readers are also the writers. The story becomes a social experience. The characters are, as Turkle (1995) argues, reflections of self.

Based on these early optimistic understandings of the internet, much of the internet-studies literature in the 1990s was dominated by a utopic vision of what

the internet was and what it represented. Much of this research was inspired by fictional forays into the exciting potentials of technological advancement, best typified by Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer*, a seminal text in the cyberpunk genre. In the novel, the main character 'Case' is a hacker hired by a mysterious employer to undertake an ambitious hacking mission, where he traverses the fantastic and exciting terrain of cyberspace – a term coined by Gibson himself.

This (retrospectively) romantic vision of the internet continues with Rheingold's (1994) 'virtual community' WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), discussed in terms of its great power to connect people. Rheingold describes his deeply personal experiences within this online (and eventually offline) community as rewarding and enriching, whether in the form of political debate or medical advice on a tick picked up by his daughter. Some years later, Tuszynski (2006) examines how online communities also formed around more specific, shared cultural interests such as 'The Bronze', a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* community. The participants in Tuszynski's research describe a similar sense of connectedness and belonging with members of their online community, eventually motivating many of them to meet offline and develop the relationships they had begun online. While experiences like this still regularly occur on the internet, they have undergone a radical shift as adoption of the internet has broadened. As I will argue, the binary between the online and the offline is deeply problematic, and these romantic notions no longer represent everyday experiences of the internet.

As Wellman (2004) explains, these utopic visions of the internet have often been met with dystopic counter-arguments, in which the internet is framed as 'the destroyer of identity and community [...where] critics wonder if relationships between people who never see, smell and hear each other could be the basis

for true community' (Wellman 2004: 26). A clear example of this utopic/dystopic divide comes in the form of the 'identity laboratory' understanding of the internet from Turkle (1995) and to some extent McRae (1997) compared to the 'identity crisis' scenario described by Gergen:

Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.

(Gergen 1991: 7)

Gergen goes on to problematise this statement, but it represents a powerful discourse that persists today, especially in relation to online presentations of self, two decades on. Turkle suggests that the potential of multiplicity be embraced, while also warning against being swept up in the non-unitary to the point of immobility or a breakdown in interaction and communication. Although somewhat outdated, this particular tension between the utopic and the dystopic still maintains some impetus (see Jordon 2005) and is potentially at the heart of a series of concerns that have sprung up around social network sites, trust and authenticity. Indeed, in her more recent work, Turkle (2011) has moved towards a much more pessimistic reading of the impact technology has on our experience of the social world. She argues that 'digital connections... offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship... allow us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to teach other' (Turkle 2011: 1). Thus, in an interesting twist, after a decade and a half of reflection, one of the original drivers of utopic discourses concerning the internet becomes a key figure in a dialogue about the negative implications of technology for our social lives. Turkle comes to insist that we are 'alone together', and 'literally at war with ourselves' (2011: 296).

Although not truly dystopic, Bolter (2007) answers utopic arguments about the liberating dimensions of the internet by insisting that individuals continue to be anchored by 'reductive bodily markers that re-invoke stereotypical notions of racialized, sexualized and gendered bodies' (Bolter 2007: 140). Sentiments such as this give rise to a trend in internet-studies that begins to move beyond the utopic/dystopic and online/offline dichotomies, towards the role of the internet in everyday life. For Wellman (2004: 29), the internet should be understood neither in dystopian terms as being associated with a 'loss of community' or identity nor in utopic terms in which a significant gain in community is visible. Instances of both the positive and negative effects of the internet on identity and on community are numerous, but reproducing the utopic/dystopic dichotomy only serves to frame the internet as separate from everyday life. As Bolter (2007) and Wellman (2004) contend, the internet should no longer be understood as a unique medium that exists external to the everyday, lived reality of the individuals who use and thus constitute the internet. Rather, as I will argue, the internet makes the everyday lives of its users visible; it is a social utility upon which systems of belonging can (for better or worse) be produced, articulated and acted upon.

In summary, the internet has been an important site for the study of identity and belonging since the early 1990s. Both utopic and dystopic discourses (sometimes from single contributors) have been embedded in this scholarship and in broader public discussions and representations of the internet, although more contemporary research signals a movement away from the utopic/dystopic dichotomy to focus on the everyday nature of the internet. This shift was necessitated by a broadening of the internet's user-base, such that the mostly-anonymous nature of the internet described by Turkle (1995) and

McRae (1997) was slowly transformed as more people began to use the internet and as the internet became more accessible and searchable (Bowker 2007; Crane 2007; Dreyfus 2009). By the early- to mid-2000s, the internet had been reframed as 'Web 2.0'.

Web 2.0?

Originally coined by DiNucci (1999), the term Web 2.0 was later popularised by O'Reilly (2007) in the mid-2000s, describing a shift that gave internet users an array of tools to become active content producers without having to learn the coding languages at the back-end of websites or be concerned with data storage to host their content. Sites like Blogger (or Blogspot), Wikipedia, YouTube and social network sites such as Friendster, MySpace and Facebook all fall under this category. The user creates an account or a profile on the site and fills in forms to produce content. Green (2010: 79), for example, describes Web 2.0 as opening up the potential for individuals to 'customise' the internet, where the internet becomes 'what we make it'. Arguably, many of the features and characteristics of Web 2.0 existed in what is now retrospectively understood to be 'Web 1.0', so a true separation between these 'versions' of the internet is problematic in the same way that pinning-down the shift from modernism to postmodernism is also problematic and contentious. However, making some broad thematic separations between 'stages' or 'versions' of the internet is similarly useful, even if that shift was gradual and indistinct.

It is also important to note the distinction between 'the web' (the World Wide Web, the WWW) and 'the internet', where the internet is a much bigger technical structure – an interconnected network of computers – and the web is what we 'surf', it is an information-sharing model. The distinction isn't

necessarily an important one for a sociological thesis, but is a useful distinction nonetheless.

While O'Reilly (2007) explains the 'web 2.0 shift' in commercial terms, it also has important implications for the emergence of the 'social web' (Gruber 2008). The internet has always offered users a platform for sharing ideas and making connections without the entanglements and requirements of traditional media (such as print, television or radio), but web 2.0 rendered these possibilities as more dynamic, social and 'open' than they had been previously. Producing content (profiles, comments, entries, videos, posts, images) became fast, easy and generally 'free'⁵. In my writing, I favour the term 'social web' over web 2.0. Simply put, the social web can be understood as 'a class of web sites and applications in which user participation is the primary driver of value' (Gruber 2008: 4). The social web is typified by sites like YouTube, Wikipedia, MySpace, Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, and so on.

Just as a singular notion of the internet or the web is problematic, so too is the broad category of 'user'. As Taylor (2007: 116) explains, 'the term "user" may not adequately describe the kind of agency at work' in online social spaces. Rather than a one-way form of interaction, 'users' on social network sites are also the content producers. Bruns (2006) uses the term produser (user-producer) which I will also borrow in places to stress the relationship between use and production of the social web. There are important considerations here in terms of a shift in the economies of production (see also, for example, Bruns

⁵ This is a contentious point. While we may not pay directly for many of the services we use on the social web, there is an in-direct cost associated with making personal information available online that can subsequently be mined for online brand advertising (Provost et al. 2009: 707; Van den Berg & van der Hof 2012).

2008), but to keep within the scope of this thesis, the following section will focus on one element of the web 2.0/social web shift: social network sites.

Social Network Sites: History and Definition

In the previous section of this chapter I made the argument that the utopic/dystopic dichotomy that has framed internet studies scholarship over the past two decades, and which continues to pervade broader popular discourse and representations of the internet, is both problematic and false. I would argue that social technologies do not cause social problems like addiction or depression (as claimed by the likes of O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011), but they do make these problems visible. Thus, the medium (social media) becomes the focus of scrutiny. Similarly, I would argue that these technologies do not inherently generate the identities or the systems of belonging that are the focus of this research. Instead, they allow for these projects of self and belonging to be made visible.

In the following section, I provide the last set of parameters for this project by defining social network sites and setting them apart from other social technologies. As I will explore in Chapter 4, the presentation of an ‘authentic’ identity (complete with the reductive markers noted by Bolter 2007), that is situated in a lived, everyday life has become increasingly important amongst users of social network sites. This is a significant departure from the kinds of identity-play discussed by Turkle (1995) and McRae (1997), driven by the opening-up of the internet as its use became ‘embedded in everyday life’ (Wellman 2004: 27). In other words, as more people began adopting the internet (and as the internet became more searchable), it became less possible to maintain a separation between an anonymous online life and an everyday,

offline life. The popularity and widespread adoption of social network sites can be largely attributed to this shift, as I will discuss in this section. While the forms of community discussed by Rheingold (1994) and Tuszynski (2006) still exist, they are dwarfed in comparison by the scale and broader adoption of social network sites like MySpace and Facebook.

In 2003, during the early stages of the shift towards the social web, the social network site Friendster entered into popular usage in the U.S., effectively becoming the first widely adopted social network site (boyd 2008a: 133). In the same year, MySpace was launched, eventually overtaking Friendster in popularity by 2006, only to be overshadowed by Facebook in 2008. At the time of writing, Facebook reported over 955 million active users (Facebook.com 2012). I will extend this analysis of the move from MySpace to Facebook in Chapter 6, especially in relation to penetration and adoption in Australia. Characteristics that each of these sites share include profile pictures, autobiographical 'about me' sections and the Friends lists that constitute the networked configuration of these sites. While different sites often include varying features (blogs, for instance, have operated slightly differently on each site, as has the 'status update' and the 'wall/comment' field) they are all, essentially, a collection of user-created profiles (or websites) that can be linked together when both parties agree to create or articulate a social tie between the profiles. They are created by completing a 'form' with basic information that generates the profile without the user needing to know (or be aware of) the back-end coding or be concerned with where the data that constitutes the profile is actually stored. These sites have become a key medium not only of communication but, as I will explore, social interaction between young people.

While there are dozens of other social network sites aside from MySpace and Facebook, none have achieved the same level of success in terms of adoption and reach. Sites like Orkut, Bebo, Cyworld and many others achieved measures of success in certain locations, albeit on a different scale to the hundreds of millions of users who have adopted MySpace and Facebook. There are also many services which are often referred to as 'social *networking* sites' or more broadly as 'social media'. These terms should be understood as umbrella descriptions of many different sites: from blogs and wikis to networking tools and broadcast services; from LiveJournal and Blogger to Twitter and YouTube. Social network sites are a sub-category of social media, and, as I will argue, are governed by specific user-developed conventions and practices that make them unique from other forms of social media. While MySpace and Facebook are distinct in many ways, as I will discuss later in this thesis, they share a set of common characteristics which lend themselves to a common grouping. As such, I will use the term social network site(s) as it offers a much more precise typology than the broader category of social networking sites or social media.

boyd and Ellison, in a key article that sets out to trace the history and future scholarship of social network sites, provide the following definition:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

(boyd & Ellison 2007: 2)

It is this definition that I will utilise throughout this thesis. boyd and Ellison go on to expand upon the second part of their definition, explaining that predominantly, users of sites like MySpace and Facebook friend people with

whom they have an existing and usually an offline relationship. Thus, these sites are generally not networking sites (emphasis on the *ing*) in that actual networking or meeting new people is not a common practice for most users on MySpace or Facebook. Rather, these sites provide a means of articulating existing relationships. I will expand upon this point in Chapter 5 when I discuss the nature of Friendship and control on social network sites.

Twitter, which has enjoyed a recent surge in adoption and growth, does not fit within this definition because it is not profile-based and it is common practice to 'follow' users without whom some existing connection is shared. While there are user profiles on Twitter, they are much shorter, less descriptive and are not at the core of the site. Instead, Twitter can be framed as a micro-blogging service as 'tweets' are restricted to 140 characters. While there is important scholarship being done on Twitter as a performative space bound up in issues of identity and belonging, the conventions that cover the social dimensions of Twitter are vastly different from the conventions that govern profile-based social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. For example, Friendship on social network sites is usually two-way; that is, when a user accepts a friend request from another user, both users are listed in each other's Friend lists. On Twitter, however, it is possible to follow another user without in turn being followed (for more on Twitter see Huberman, Romero & Wu 2009; Marwick & boyd 2011). Similarly, Tumblr, predominantly an image blogging site, raises important implications for scholarship on young people and identity, but it is again beyond the scope of this research focussed on profile-based social network sites. In summary, this project focuses on the two most widely adopted, profile-based social network sites in Australia: MySpace and Facebook.

While scholarship on social network sites has enjoyed a surge of interest in the past five years and now includes a wide variety of scholars from various disciplines, much of the early research on these sites was pioneered by danah boyd (2006, 2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011; boyd & Ellison 2007). boyd's ethnographic work with young American users of social network sites is frequently cited and operationalised by many researchers with an interest in social network sites. boyd argues for a more nuanced conceptualisation of social network sites as involved and integrated into the everyday lives of young people, an argument I advance. As cited above, boyd and Ellison (2007) make a clear argument for a definition of social network sites that separates sites like MySpace and Facebook from networking sites that have been verified in other research.

Joinson's (2008: 1029) study of Facebook users in the UK found that most participants used the site primarily to 'keep in touch' with existing friends. Again in the United States, Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez and Schuler (2008: 2) found that, contrary to reports of MySpace users often having outrageous lists of Friends that would be unlikely to represent an offline network of contacts, most users actually had an average of 145 Friends with 58 per cent having less than 100. These findings imply a fixed clustering of relationships and contacts, reminiscent of face-to-face interactions, consistent with boyd and Ellison's (2007) claim that the networks articulated on social network sites reflect existing, offline networks. To return to an earlier thread in this chapter, as more users adopt social network sites the potential for broader network articulation is increased while the capacity for identity-play (reminiscent of the work by Turkle 1995 and McRae 1997) in these spaces is diminished.

Social Network Sites: An Australian Perspective

In Australia, the research on social network sites is still developing, and is lagging behind the wealth of research being done elsewhere, especially in the United States and in Europe as described above. Young (2009) provides a quantitative 'Australian perspective' on usage of social network sites, albeit with some limitations that I will discuss in subsequent chapters. Usefully, however, Young does conclude that 'users of social network sites must be given a greater voice on their experiences, beyond that which can be obtained from a researcher-constructed survey' (2009: 53). This call-to-action frames the intention of my own research project.

Notley (2009) considers the ways in which nine Australian teens identified as being 'at risk' of social exclusion used social network sites to 'participate in society'. Gregg's (2011) research on Facebook is focussed on the slippery divide between work and leisure, and more recently (Brown & Gregg 2012) on Facebook, alcohol consumption and 'pedagogies of regret'. Dobson (2008, 2012) considers the presentations of various femininities on MySpace. While these various and disparate projects contribute in part to a broader Australian perspective on social network sites, it is also clear that there is considerable work to be done to extend these accounts. The research discussed in this thesis aims to contribute to that broader research agenda.

Chapter Conclusion

In subsequent chapters I will continue to engage with the rapidly growing body of literature that seeks to understand social network sites with a particular focus on research that examines the practices young users are developing to manage their presence online and how that presence is socially and culturally situated.

As a foundation, boyd argues for what she terms 'networked publics': '(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice' (2011a: 39). While I will address this notion of space from the first dimension of boyd's networked publics in Chapter 5 when I discuss friending as a mechanism for controlling space, it is the second dimension, 'the imagined collective' that this thesis will address most directly. Indeed, the key aim of this research project has been to explore how the performance of young people's identity projects on social network sites comes to reflect, articulate and make visible systems of belonging.

It is clear that questions of identity are always bound up in issues of belonging. Identities cannot be understood without a frame of reference to systems of belonging; whether through friendship groups, communities, subcultures or nation-states, identity-projects are not meaningful without some sense of the individual's position within these systems. In the following chapter I establish a framework for the theory of identity that I will use to approach the broader issue of belonging that is at the core of this project.

Chapter 2: Young Mediated Identities

Young people have always devoted attention to the presentation of self. Friendships have always been made, displayed and broken. Strangers – unknown, weird or frightening – have always hovered on the edge of the group, and often, adult onlookers have been puzzled by youthful peer practices. Yet the recent explosion in online social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and others has attracted considerable interest from the academy, policymakers, parents and young people themselves, the repeated claim being that something new is taking place. What, then, is distinctive about the youthful construction of self and peer relations, now that this is mediated increasingly by social networking sites?

(Livingstone 2008: 394)

In discussing the rise of social network sites, led by a 'vanguard' of the young, Livingstone reflects here upon the importance of identity-work for young people. She describes this 'explosion' in the popularity of social network sites as being bound-up in a devotion young people exhibit towards presenting themselves. In Buckingham's terms, the identity-work going on in these spaces is being done by young people 'as social actors in their own right, as "beings," and not simply as "becomings"' (Buckingham 2008: 19). I end the above quote from Livingstone on a question she seeks to answer; a question that is also central to this project. Rather than setting out to locate a particular distinction between the forms of identity construction and performance that occur online and those that occur offline, however, I have found it more useful to understand these forms of sociality, these modes of being, as so deeply interrelated that it is possible to envisage a position from which no distinction exists. It is counter-productive to separate the identity politics involved in choosing what shirt to wear in the morning from what profile picture to use on Facebook, for instance.

My argument here will be that the conceptual work done by others around impression maintenance, symbolic control and the idealised presentation of self

can often be carried over to the identity-work being done 'on the internet'. I will contend here that despite the focus on new forms of identity mediation in the digital era, identities and belongings have always been mediated: by bodies, by language, by social structures, by culture. The 'explosion' of investment in social network sites, flagged by Livingstone, is also at the core of what this thesis works to document and frame as a new medium in which identities and systems of belonging can be reflexively articulated, made visible and acted upon.

In this chapter, I seek to establish a framework for identity that can be translated to the forms of sociality that take place on social network sites. In achieving this goal, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I develop an understanding of identity as always-already mediated and situated. I also consider the role social network sites play in disturbing or reconfiguring this process of mediation, thus advancing my argument that the emerging practices of identity performance online require ongoing revision and study. Second, I consider how Goffman's dramaturgical framework may be appropriated as a useful platform from which the presentation of self in everyday life can (and, as I argue, should) be extended to online forms of self-presentation. These forms of identity are, as I have already begun to argue, an increasingly important part of the everyday lives of many individuals, especially young people in the 'vanguard' of developing social practices in these spaces. I will focus on documenting and analysing these practices in Chapters 4 to 7. Finally, I conclude this chapter by suggesting a more recent 'late-modern' sociological perspective, focussing on Giddens' (1991) 'reflexive project of the self' and how it can be applied to better understand the ways in which social network sites serve as tools in broader reflexive identity work.

Questions of Identity: Always-already Mediated

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal.

(Hall 1996: 2)

People mark their identities by symbols of difference.

(Woodward 2000: 33)

One thinks of identity... [in order] to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns.

(Bauman 1996: 19)

These quotes illustrate three key characteristics fundamental to the approach to identity I take in this thesis: acknowledging similarity and sameness ('I am the same as that person'); observing difference ('I am different from that person'); and positioning oneself within 'systems' of belonging (whether as subcultures⁶, lifestyles, tribes, movements, or collective identities – 'I *belong* to that group'). These three characteristics of identity allow individuals to negotiate with other identities and to construct their own in an ongoing, open-ended 'project of the self' which I will discuss in more detail in the third section of this chapter.

Merleau-Ponty speaks of the cultural world as an instrument that we have projected around ourselves to express meaning (1962: 196). As part of this cultural world, identities operate in the same way – projected around the individual through a process of identity performance. These projected identities allow individuals to 'go on in each other's presence' (Bauman 1996: 19). Just as culture requires an interactive impetus or dialogue, identity is similarly shaped and driven by interaction. Social interaction, then, is central to identity formation.

⁶ Although I contest and problematise this term as useful for many young people later in this thesis, I use it here to describe one form of belonging, that is particularly resonant in popular discourse around young people and belonging, amongst many.

Fragmented Selves and the Crisis of Identity

[I]dentities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

(Hall 1996: 4)

Hall goes on to discuss a 'crisis of identity [...] which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world' (Hall 2004: 114). This discourse of crisis is not only a powerful commentary on late modern or postmodern forms of identity but it also becomes a damaging criticism of online expressions of identity. The fragmentation and fracturing described by Hall is greatly magnified in an era often characterised by the 'digital': a system in which information is literally broken down into bits for transmission and reconstituted in meaningful ways by the receiver. An image of a friend riding an elephant in Thailand that is accessible through Facebook has made a long and complex journey to arrive on a screen elsewhere in the world; a journey of information packets that is necessarily fractured and fragmented, but that is eventually reorganised and rendered meaningful. I would offer this as an alternative metaphor that embraces the fragmented conceptualisation of late- or post-modern forms of identity, framing fragmentation not as a crisis but as a necessary process in coherence.

Bennett explains that 'a central feature of postmodernity is its empowering of the individual subject [...] allowing them to construct identities which are freed from the confines and restraints of class and tradition [...providing individuals with] the freedom to choose one's identity' (Bennett 2005: 40). This mobility and

expectation for individuals to embrace agency has become a comfortable reality for postmodern societies. However, in the age of the internet, Hall's 'crisis of identity' and other criticisms of postmodern identity are gaining new currency in debates around issues such as identity theft, addiction to online role-playing games and the shift to social network sites and other forms of online communication as being 'prioritised' over traditional offline forms of communication.

I make these points to provide some indication of how the theoretical frameworks around identity that I develop in this chapter will unfold. This section briefly and selectively provides a theoretical background that will be contextualised and applied to online forms of identity as they occur on social network sites. The question this project will address is how the process of identity performance occurs online where bodies can be physically dispersed (although this is not always the case) and mediated by the screen through a non-physical form of co-presence. Before I can begin to answer this question, however, there are a series of essential questions that must come prior, the first of which is concerned with mediation itself.

There is a tendency, not only in popular discourse, but also in the humanities and the social sciences, to think of the social interactions that occur on the internet as somehow 'un real' or at least less legitimate. I would argue that this is a misconception, stemming from the perception that the screen (the computer screen, the smartphone screen) mediates social interactions obstructively. As Frabetti (2011: 2) asks, in relation to the internet, '[i]s not access to every text always already mediated by technology (such as, e.g., by writing)?' I would extend this question to all forms of social interaction. Are our interactions not always-already mediated by bodies, by languages, by gender and other social

structures, by institutions? Certainly, the internet does offer new and even unique configurations of these forms of mediation in some instances, and thus new literacies for 'being on the internet' are sometimes required. However, the familiar 'offline' rules of mediation, into which members of societies are socialised, can be (and have been, and are being) translated to the social spaces of the internet.

It is not my intention to argue here that offline, in-person, physical interactions are somehow the same as a video chat or an email or a Facebook inbox message or a comment on a profile wall. As I have argued, I see this binary as false and central to the misconception that these forms of interaction are somehow at odds – that the online is in competition with the offline. As I will discuss in detail through my empirical work in Chapters 4 to 7, social spaces on the internet often operate alongside, in concert with and as part of everyday physical interactions. For example, consider a series of discussions centred on photos from a weekend of partying (a 'Facebook debrief'), the organisation of sexual and romantic encounters (a 'Grindr⁷ hookup', or a date organised on a dating site, for example), an invitation to a birthday party, or a skype call to organise a wedding. Whatever the form, it is clear that this imagined and supposedly obstructive binary between the online and the offline is a false one, reproduced by a misconception about the always-already mediated nature of sociality. Thus, while I necessarily work with this binary in some ways (as this research is framed, in part, as 'internet research'), I also work against it in others. In other words, this research contributes to a discussion that seeks to do

⁷ Grindr is a smartphone application designed to facilitate interaction between strangers organised by physical proximity. People using the application nearby you, for example, are identified. The service is designed for gay men.

away with this binary so we can think not of offline and online practices, but of practices of the everyday.

Central to understanding the three components of identity (sameness, difference and belonging) and how they play-out in online social spaces will be the recognition that identity, belonging, and all social interactions are always-already mediated. The social sciences have been devoted to understanding how individuals interact with one another, and how society and culture shape and have an impact on those interactions. The challenge for this thesis, then, is not to consider the new and unique forms of sociality emerging 'on the internet', but instead to examine the ways in which existing social processes, such as identity and belonging, translate to and are reconfigured for social spaces that are mediated by the screen through the internet.

Revisiting Goffman and the Dramaturgical Framework

In achieving this goal, the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism has much to offer. Beyond the methodological lessons of this perspective (which I will discuss in the following chapter), symbolic interactionism offers an understanding of how identity is formed and maintained (or abandoned or imagined) that can act as a model for how identity as an ongoing process plays out on social network sites, despite the differences in mediation. As Blumer (1969) explains, the tradition of symbolic interactionism is underpinned by three premises: first, individuals act towards things (objects, other people, groups of people, institutions, and ideals) based on the meanings that those things have for them; second, those meanings are derived from social interactions; and third, the *use* of those meanings in action involve an 'interpretive process' (Blumer 1969: 5). This third premise, the interpretive process, is described by

Blumer as a kind of internal reconciling whereby the 'actor is interacting with himself... the actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed' (1969: 5). In other words, meaning emerges (is constructed) through social interactions with others, but is then deployed to make sense in specific contexts.

It has been my aim to understand how these sets of processes operate on social network sites. It is my argument that conventions around 'being' online (determining access to profiles and what constitutes a Friend, deciding what to share, what or who to delete, how to describe an event or communicate an idea) emerge from shared social interactions during in-person, physical conversations, and in exchanges mediated online, but often from some mixture of these two. How those shared conventions (or violations of those conventions) are then applied, however, relates to the 'interpretive process' that Blumer describes as so essential to a symbolic interactionist approach. As I will go on to describe in Chapter 3, the interactionist tradition also provides a methodological framework for understanding these social processes, whereby Blumer contends that symbolic interactionism is essentially about 'respect' of the empirical world, and any inquiry under the banner of symbolic interactionism requires a methodological stance that reflects that respect (1969: 60).

To advance and further justify my (somewhat selective) use of interactionism, for the remainder of this section I will draw on Goffman's (1959, 1979) dramaturgical framework for understanding the presentation of self in everyday social interactions. Goffman likens these interactions to a stage performance in which actors use props and cues from their audience to sculpt their self-presentations. He argues that when individuals interact, they are compelled to draw on available resources to know the person with whom they are confronted:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed... Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him.

(Goffman 1959: 1)

Identity performance is a crucial component of social interaction – without this ‘presentation of self’ or without the ability to ‘read’ the identity performances of an individual, agentic social interaction could not occur. Drawing on past experiences and available signifiers, individuals construct a narrative around the person with whom they are interacting. This narrative draws accessible markers of identity together into a cohesive story, informing appropriate forms of interaction and behaviour, providing parameters for the interaction (or points of resistance). Goffman provides the example of the ‘sympathetic patients in mental wards [that] will sometimes feign bizarre symptoms so that student nurses will not be subjected to a disappointingly sane performance’ (1959: 16). In other words, it is clear that identity performance is also subject to a sense of expectation; an anticipation based on those narrative parameters, informed by previous experiences and assumptions.

Regions and Standards

Goffman’s example implies that the socialised individual always has some understanding of what constitutes an appropriate performance of identity in certain social situations. There are rules – often unwritten, although in some cases institutionalised – for different spaces and situations: restaurants have dress codes, laws govern responsible driving behaviours and swimwear is usually only acceptable at the beach or pool. Individuals, the actors in Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, move between performances often without

consciously noting it, drawing on certain markers of identity more heavily in different situations. Goffman describes different social contexts as 'regions', in which the performance of individuals is governed by two broad sets of 'standards': first, the way in which the performer engages with the audience, verbally and non-verbally; and second, 'the way in which the performer comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them' (1959: 110). Thus, Goffman argues that an appropriate self-policed performance of identity – determined by the standards of the region, or the space in which the performance takes place – must be maintained, whether in direct or in-direct contact with a perceived audience. These rules and codes of interaction are generally well established in face-to-face situations, as we learn them through the process of socialisation throughout our lives. Translating norms into online forms of sociality can be problematic as the cues transmitted in physical spaces that signal what presentation of self is appropriate are reconfigured in online social spaces. For instance, the very recent and broad adoption of social network sites (in historical terms) has created some anxiety around how people should 'act' on social network sites, an anxiety that is most intensely projected on young people. It is my argument, however, that although these spaces are 'new', they can be built upon existing social conventions. Rather than inventing entirely new ways of being online, my participants have demonstrated ways in which existing norms and practices (how to deal with strangers, what constitutes a friend, how to conduct oneself in public) can be reconfigured to work in online social spaces. I will return to this reconfiguration of social practices in Chapter 4 when I discuss emerging strategies for the performance of identity on social network sites. For now, I will explore how this notion of regions and social context can

translate from Goffman's physical, in-person exchange to an online social interaction.

The Idealised Self and Socialisation

Central to the discussions I will continue in Chapter 4 around authenticity and integrity in the presentation of self online are questions around the 'idealised' self. Goffman approaches the 'presentation of idealized performances' (1959: 44) through a literature on social mobility, arguing that these idealised presentations are aspirational, that individuals will instinctively perform the best version of themselves, which he terms the idealised self. This isn't a fake performance or a deception, but simply a presentation of what the individual regards to be the best qualities and appearances, contingent upon the standards of the region. Goffman is not very specific on the process of socialisation, or how the individual comes to learn the standards of performance (compared, for example, to Butler, who I will discuss below). He does offer the observation that the individual must 'learn enough pieces of expression to be able to "fill in" and manage, more or less, any part that he is likely to be given' (1959: 79), but fails to offer a clear argument about how and where this learning occurs – whether through parents, schools, mass media, and so on – although one can safely assume it would be a complex set of experiences and role models working in concert that lead to a sufficient number of 'pieces of expression' being mastered for the performance.

Butler (1988) offers a clearer sense of socialisation as a process. Focussing on gender, she likens this marker of identity to the recital of a script: the more the script is recited, the more it becomes taken-for-granted, manifesting the illusion of stability that is normalised in everyday life. Gender is a socially learned performance, taught to us as children. Dominant ideologies (patriarchy,

heteronormativity and subjugation as Other in the male/female binary for Butler) shape the individual's performance. Butler demonstrates the lack of stability in gender by drawing attention to the process by which it is learned:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.

(Butler 1988: 519)

The instructors that teach these stylised repetitions probably don't consider this – rather, they are simply maintaining the status quo, encouraging young boys and girls to act 'as they should'. If gender is a learned performance, then it is a malleable and fluid construct. In noticing that gender is performed and taught by repetition, Butler demonstrates that if individuals can learn to adhere to hegemony, they can also unlearn the sanctioned performance or at least trouble it. This malleable and unfixed notion of performance is framed as a postmodern understanding of identity, summarised well by Kristeva's notion of the *sujet-en-procès* or the 'subject in progress' (Kristeva in Moi 1986: 91). The subject, here, is in progress and on-trial existing as a transitional configuration between categories: 'the subject is by nature in motion' (Prud'homme & Légaré 2006). I will return to this notion of identity as unfixed and in-progress in the final section of this chapter through Giddens' notion of the reflexive project of self.

To return to Goffman's notion of the idealised self, important for my framing of Chapter 4 on integrity and authenticity in the performance of identity on social network sites, Goffman argues that when actors enact the idealised performance, they become the idealised self; constantly (or not, depending on the level of attentiveness required by the performance) fixing their hair or makeup in reflective surfaces and tucking in errant shirts. The extent of these

'revisions' to maintain that idealised presentation varies from person to person, as does the extent to which an idealised performance is enacted on social network sites. The crucial point that I will return to in Chapter 4 is concerned with the extent to which producers of social network sites have control over the presentation of self in a space where others are also able to affect and modify that presentation. For example, on a social network site, it is much easier to circulate an unflattering photo or an image that could otherwise disrupt the presentation of an idealised self than Goffman could have anticipated.

Mendelson and Papacharissi, in their study of college students' Facebook photo galleries, note that in personal photography 'the positive is always recorded over the negative, with moments of celebration emphasized' (2011: 254). This appears to map neatly on to the notion of the idealised self. However, participants in their study also found themselves being tagged in photographs that did not align with their idealised self: 'To another embarrassing photo, the subject commented: "Bad hair!!!! DESTROY! DESTROY!"' (Participant in Mendelson & Papacharissi 2011: 262).

While being embarrassed by a failure to present an idealised front is certainly not unique to identity performance in online social spaces, the crucial difference is in the persistent nature of the 'bad' photograph or the incriminating status update. As Carroll and Landry (2010) note, the implications of the persistent nature of content on social network sites requires further research. While a user might 'untag'⁸ themselves in a photo, that image may persist even when it isn't linked to a user, until the person who uploaded the photo deletes it or it is flagged for deletion by Facebook. Even after an image is deleted, it is unclear

⁸ 'Untagging' is also described as de-tagging or removing a tag, but untagging appeared more frequently in the vernacular.

as to how long the image is stored on Facebook's servers or in server backups, potentially remaining online, if not readily accessible, for years after deletion (Cheng 2012).

Thus, in revisiting this notion of the idealised self in Goffman's dramaturgical framework and seeking to extend it to presentations of self on social network sites, it is important to consider not only questions of authenticity and integrity (is it possible to present a 'fake' version of self?), but also to attend to the implication that others (trusted friends or otherwise) can also play a part in this process, through tagging persistent images of the individual or making comments on the individual's wall, status updates, and so on, that do not align with that individual's own concept of the idealised self.

Sign-equipment

For Goffman, props – 'sign-equipment' (1959: 45) – are a central part of performing the idealised self. This symbolic equipment which individuals recruit to their performances includes an array of material goods. What constitutes the 'ideal', for Goffman, 'will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society' (1959: 45). In other words, the context of the presentation is again central to the performance itself. A new suit or high heels may not be appropriate for a bush rave, just as wearing flip-flops and shorts to a corporate job interview would represent a misunderstanding (or resistance to) the standards of the region. In some situations, recruiting the wrong sign-equipment (wearing the wrong costume) can result in exclusion from a venue or even an arrest if the performative transgression is indecent enough. Discussing clothes, Goffman proposed that men wore three different types of costumes:

Men are displayed in formal, business, and informal gear, and although it seems understood that the same individual will at

different times appear in all these guises, each guise seems to afford him something he is totally serious about, and deeply identified with, as though wearing a skin, not a costume.

(Goffman 1979: 51)

The link between clothes and identity is strongly foregrounded here by Goffman, and I dwell on this point at some length given how directly the idea of sign-equipment can be transposed to internet-mediated spaces – a point to which I will return. Women are also addressed by Goffman, although very differently, betraying the prejudices of the day. He says that women are less attached to strict performances – almost flippant in their fashion choices, ‘as though life were a series of costume balls,’ where one is free to ‘mock one’s own appearance’ (Goffman 1979: 51). Goffman proposes that because women adhere less strictly to costume categories, they identify less with their clothes. There are clear problems with these assertions, especially given the shifts in attitudes towards fashion by men since Goffman’s work was published. Men are increasingly likely to transgress these costume categories and blur any divisions, just as some women could probably fit in to the stifling typology for men’s clothes that Goffman advances above.

Despite these flaws, Goffman’s observations are not without their merit, especially the role sign-equipment (clothes in this instance) plays in identity performance. This argument could be extended to a variety of identity devices: cars, books chosen for display in an office, ornaments that decorate coffee tables and, central to this project, the array of devices that can be used in the presentation of self on social network sites. While Goffman deals with fashion as a physical and embodied example of how identity is performed, it is the symbolic and cultural importance of clothes that makes his analysis pertinent

and particularly resonant for a research project interested in how identity is performed on social network sites.

Despite the broad application of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to performances of self mediated by the internet (boyd 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2011a, 2011b; Hewitt & Forte 2006; Menchik & Tian 2008; Robinson 2008; Tufekci 2008b; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2011), there have also been various criticisms of the way in which Goffman's theories have been applied to online social spaces.

According to Barnes, one of the central arguments in symbolic interactionism is that 'physical bodily interaction with objects and people is necessary to develop a sense of self' (2000: 170), and thus the performance of self in a space where physical bodies are not present inhibits the development of a sense of self. Consider, for example, Miller's (1995) early attempt to apply Goffman's dramaturgical framework to online social interactions. Miller argues that online interactions increasingly mirror offline physical interactions: 'Electronic communication will become more and more human communication to the extent that there is more to it than just efficiently passing information to each other' (1995: 2). He concludes, however, that at the time of his research, the internet lacked the depth needed for 'electronic selves' to truly emerge. Miller argues that while online interaction is undeniably social, important performative cues transmitted in physical interaction (facial expressions, clothes, intonation, body language, etc.) that Goffman saw as so important are notably absent. Thus, Miller (and others, including more recently Owen 2011) bring in to question the 'legitimacy' and 'value' of online performances of self, rendering this form of mediation as subordinate to physical interaction and thus somehow disingenuous.

Nearly 15 years after Miller, Pearson (2009) moves beyond questions of legitimacy and applies the dramaturgical framework directly to social network sites and the private/public divide, through Goffman's frontstage/backstage paradigm. In the years since Miller conducted his update of Goffman's theory, the richness and depth of social interaction online has developed far beyond the personal homepages and text-only interactions found in email exchanges and discussion forums with which Miller was dealing (along with the likes of Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1995; McRae 1997; Dibbell 1999).

Social network sites add a new dimension to the online performance of self, incorporating dynamic content updated not only by the profile author but by Friends and contacts. Social network sites have become complicated and nuanced stages of identity performance. As Pearson argues, 'the audience and the performer are disembodied and electronically re-embodied through signs they choose to represent themselves' (2009). Pearson concludes that social network sites blur the boundaries between private and public, backstage and frontstage. Her assertion is that the nature of the internet (and thus social network sites) is inherently susceptible to third-party lurking – by individuals outside the 'glass bedroom' – that observe interactions without participating.

Also seeking to advance this understanding of frontstage and backstage, Pinch (2010) invokes Goffman's 'sociology of doors', arguing that the rise of new technologies (such as social network sites) often obscures the importance of 'old technologies' and their role in everyday life. The door in a hotel restaurant, for example, functions as a technology for separating the frontstage and backstage performances of waiters and cooks, but is rendered invisible because of its mundane nature. Pinch also recalls the important role of the horse in World War 2, overshadowed by new technologies such as the

microwave radar and the atomic bomb (2011: 409). Moving on to the rise of the internet, and providing a potential answer to critics of the application of the dramaturgical framework to online interactions, Pinch offers an alternate interpretation of Goffman's (1963) notion of co-presence:

[Goffman] mainly restricted this notion [of co-presence] to full bodily presence, by which he meant something like a physical area where interactants find themselves in visual and aural range of one another. If co-presence is interpreted as only bodily co-presence, then the idea will have limited applicability to online worlds. But if co-presence is conceived of as a means whereby interactants are available and accountable to each other for their mediated interactions, it has a wider application.

(Pinch 2010: 420)

While flagging this second, wider interpretation of co-presence in applications of Goffman's dramaturgical framework is not common in the literature, it does provide a viable route by which Goffman's important observations and theories on the presentation of self can be made applicable to online forms of sociality. Pinch goes on to advance this second interpretation by providing another example of an old technology that can help us think about the implications of new ones:

The clue to thinking about co-presence and its application to an online world is again to think about mediated interactions which do not involve computers. A useful example here is letter writing. This is a mediated form of communication with its own special norms and obligations. Writing and receiving letters are accountable social actions. The importance of the mediation and how it affects the accountability of actions can be seen when for some reason a person who writes a letter is present when the recipient reads it. The ensuing mild embarrassment is telling and derives precisely from the changed form of mediation and co-presence.

(Pinch 2010: 420-421)

This thesis documents strategies that, in Bauman's words, allow individuals to 'go on in each others' presence' (1996: 19). In online social spaces, however, that presence (or co-presence) operates somewhat differently. As Pinch explains here, forms of co-presence that are mediated online are much less foreign than one might expect. A similar kind of mild embarrassment can be seen when people discuss, during physical in-person conversations, what 'goes on' on Facebook. As I will discuss, participants in my study described the awkwardness involved in meeting with someone they hadn't seen in-person for some time, but having little to discuss because they shared so much with each other online. The cautionary criticisms of applications of Goffman's dramaturgical framework, then, are useful insofar as they invite scholars to properly reflect upon the theories they are deploying. While the dramaturgical framework is not without its limitations, if a wider interpretation of co-presence can be sustained (whereby individuals are available and accountable to each other despite physical distance) then Goffman's insights can continue to provide a rich and valuable framework from which interactions mediated by the internet can be better understood.

Performances Versus Exhibitions, as Artefacts of Self

Developing this application of Goffman's work to the internet further, especially in relation to the notion of co-presence contested in Pinch's (2010) work, Hogan (2010) offers a more nuanced understanding of the dramaturgical framework. He makes a distinction between 'performances', where 'actors behave with each other', and 'exhibitions', where individuals 'submit artifacts to show to each other' (Hogan 2010: 377). Hogan clarifies that exhibitions can also be performances of self (consider the display of photographs in a home), but that these exhibitions do not require co-presence:

Clarifying this distinction creates an expanded theoretical repertoire for scholars, thereby enabling them to disentangle processes occurring when actors are copresent (in time, if not in the same geographic place) and processes that occur when actors are not necessarily present at the same time but still react to each other's data... One of the key distinctions between exhibitions and performances is that performances are subject to continual observation and self-monitoring as the means for impression management, whereas exhibitions are subject to selective contributions.

(Hogan 2010: 377, 384)

Hogan acknowledges that there are limitations to this typology, such as what he refers to as the 'hybrid spaces' of MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) that 'share aspects of both off-line situations and online exhibitions' (2010: 382). Can all content not be considered a performance, though? In answering this question, Hogan argues that performance must be understood as either ephemeral or recorded, where the latter transforms the performance and renders it subject to a different kind of 'aura' (by way of Benjamin 1967). However, I would argue that there are examples of interactions (framed as exhibitions in Hogan's typology) on social network sites that are also quite ephemeral. Consider 'Mikalah', a teenaged participant in one of boyd's (2010) studies, who deactivates her Facebook account (rendering her profile invisible/non-existent to her network) each time she isn't directly engaged with the site, or 'Shamika', another of boyd's participants, who deletes each wall post, status update, and 'Like', shortly after it is posted. Both of these practices constitute a form of participation, but also render the recorded performances as ephemeral in different ways, troubling the seemingly neat typology Hogan is seeking to advance.

Despite the various limitations discussed in this section – from any application of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to the internet at all, through to the

limitations of much more nuanced interpretations and typologies advanced by Pinch (2010) and Hogan (2010) – it is clear that this framework remains useful for understanding the way individuals present themselves, even when the technologies of mediation are ‘new’ and present new challenges. For this reason, I have recruited Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to this project, informed and revised by a growing area of scholarship discussed here. In the final section of this chapter, I look to the more recent work of Giddens to provide a useful understanding of identity as reflexively constructed and in-progress, especially for the young people at the core of this thesis.

The Reflexive Project of Self

Giddens argues that identity formation is a reflexive process. Individuals frequently undergo what he describes as a ‘psychic reorganisation’ (1993: 304) of their identity, negotiating the influence of large impersonal organisations that characterise late modernity. Giddens defines the ‘stable individual’ as someone with a ‘feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to others’ (1991: 54). As with the theories from scholars in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the social aspect of identity – the act of communicating a reflexive story about self, or performing a region specific, standard-adhering sense of self – is central to stability, and what Giddens describes here as the notion of continuity. Giddens argues against assumptions that we reinvent ourselves only at crisis moments in our lives, instead contending that individuals are actively and endlessly negotiating and constructing self-identity, even amidst the mundane experiences of the everyday. This argument is consistent with Gergen’s (1991) claim, discussed in the previous chapter, (p. 29) that the identity projects of individuals are in a constant state of construction and reconstruction, at once

'shaped by social structures' (Woodward 2000: 1) such as class and gender, while also being the product of some agency or 'choice' (Beck 1992).

Taken together, Giddens describes this approach as the reflexive project of self, 'the process whereby self identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self narratives' (1991: 244). As Thomson explains, 'storytelling (to ourselves and others) is central to the construction of a reflexive project of self. As we rework existing narratives and forge new ones, we invent and reinvent who it is possible to be' (2007: 80). In further contextualising Giddens' reflexive project of self, Thomson makes the claim that contemporary (late modern) society demands a much more active engagement in this reflexive storytelling labour. She provides the example of a flexible and uncertain employment market, where a version of self is constantly written and re-written through the curriculum vitae and participation in public institutions such as continuing higher education and welfare. Thomson also points towards an intensification of the 'work on self identity in private: in conversations with our parents, partners and friends, through reading self-help literature, magazines and horoscopes' (2007: 81).

One point that Thomson touches on very briefly is the added option to develop a 'personal website', which, for Thomson, would also figure in to the reflexive project of self, requiring yet another ordering of narratives. In the years since Thomson was re-reading Giddens' reflexive project of self in relation to young people's transition narratives, the 'personal website' continues to operate as a useful professional tool, but has been dwarfed by participation in social network sites. Rather than engagement here being a 'choice', it is my argument in this thesis that having and maintaining a profile on a social network site is becoming (or has become) mandatory for many, especially for young people, where not

participating can mean being left off invitation lists for parties, not seeing photos of newborn babies or weddings, and appearing 'unavailable' to friends, along with other forms of exclusion. Participation in online expressions of the reflexive project of self has become an important part of late modern life, not in addition to things like employment, a personal life, and a sense of community, but as a medium through which these forms of participation in the social world are mediated. For example, Miller's (2011) *Tales from Facebook* dips into the lives of people from Trinidad for whom Facebook serves an important social utility. For Miller's participants, Facebook was used to seek employment, to conduct informal study groups, and also played a role in the formation (and decline) of relationships. For these individuals, maintaining a presence on Facebook was crucial for maintaining participation in employment and education.

The profiles that constitute social network sites can, in relation to Giddens' reflexive project of self, be understood through two different and yet related frames: first, as a tool that can be used in the process of reflexive self-making; and second, as an object (or a product) of that project. Through the first frame, the initial construction of a profile and the subsequent social interactions mediated on the site can be understood as labour involved in the ordering of self-narratives. For instance, the individual is prompted (but isn't required) to enter employment and education details, to list favourite books, films, music and television shows, to identify favourite quotes, religious and political views, and state their sex and a subsequent 'interested in' field, signalling gender and sexual identity. Thus, filling out the initial profile is akin to the ordering of self-narratives required in the writing of a curriculum vitae for Thomson (2007). Interestingly, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 6, this initial biographical about me side of the profile, at least on Facebook, is not at the core of the site's

functionality. Instead, it is the social exchanges – commenting on and posting pictures, status updates, wall posts, and events; exchanging private inbox messages and participating in IM (Instant Messenger) conversations; and the subsequent ‘curation’ (Hogan 2010) of this content (untagging, deleting, editing) – that constitute the everyday engagement with the site.

The second frame, then, is the product of this labour, of these interactions, that the individual can reflect upon. In this sense, the profile (which is not contained, but through the architecture of hypertext serves as one point of reference to other pages and profiles) operates as an archive of the reflexive project of self. Producers of social network sites can look back on their lives in a convenient format: past relationships, distant parties, previous employment, past education, even current news items posted to a network, memorialising a tragedy like the Queensland floods or celebrating a political achievement like the passing of a same-sex civil unions bill. Through this frame, the variously public and personal conversations of self with others (and self with self) discussed by Thomson (2007) can be articulated and archived in a single place. In Kim’s words, social network sites ‘are both the object and process of self-formation’ (2010: 109). Kim doesn’t explore this argument in any depth, consistent with a broader gap in the literature that needs to consider more thoroughly the way in which social network sites can constitute a playing-out of Giddens’ reflexive project of self. I seek to contribute to a closing of this gap in Chapter 6.

Cheung (2004) makes use of Giddens’ reflexive project of self in a useful although now somewhat dated way. Cheung specifically investigates the personal homepage as a medium of identity-play, a ‘form of media which facilitates the reflexive project of the self’ (2004: 60). While Cheung deals with

the overt performance of self that occurs on many homepages, as touched upon in the previous section of this chapter, he also discusses the generative dimensions of this process. That is, when the performance of identity functions also as a process for configuring (or figuring out) a project of self. Cheung notices that the act of performing a self can also be a negotiation of multiplicity, an attempt to localise or unify identity. The postmodern self, he observes, is often far from unified:

[Consider] the Chinese-American lecturing in the USA, who feels passionate about gay fiction but also about heterosexual pornographic movies, who loves both academic books and PlayStation games, and who actually supports feminism yet likes Sylvester Stallone's movies a lot.

(Cheung 2004: 59)

Cheung argues that writing this self into being online can be a trying experience. Indeed, it requires multiple performances in the same space, a problem that all users of social network sites must negotiate, as I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5. As participation in online identity performances move away from personal homepages and more towards profile-based social network sites, the nature of reflexive identity work persists, but the ways in which this process plays out in a networked and inherently more social environment requires a much more nuanced approach. Instead of the largely static form of the homepage, maintaining an 'authentic' or conventional profile on a social network site requires regularly updating and 'curating' (Hogan 2010) dynamic content. In addition to initial 'constructions of self', it is the interaction and ongoing performance of self that bestows legitimacy and authenticity on the social network site.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a set of theoretical frameworks concerning identity and mediation that this thesis builds upon. In the first section, I identified three characteristics of identity that are useful in the identity-work that this research documents as occurring on social network sites: sameness, difference, and belonging. In this section, I also advanced my argument that identity is always-already mediated, and that the internet offers another medium for performing and expressing a sense of self, rather than a radically new 'virtual realm'. Thus, it is my contention that existing theories of identity can be applied to the identity-work mediated by the internet, leading to the second and third parts of this chapter. In the second section on Goffman, I provided a thorough reflection on how Goffman's dramaturgical framework has been applied to online identity performances. I have explored criticisms of this application, along with more recent thinking that attends closely to the social network sites with which my own research is concerned, advancing and bringing useful nuances to the application of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to online social spaces (Pearson 2009; Pinch 2010; Hogan 2010). In the third section, I recruited Giddens' theory of the reflexive project of self in late modern society, and argued that social network sites can act as both a utility in the organising of narratives for this self-project, and as an archive for the project, allowing users to document and reflect on biographical transition.

The emerging strategies and norms that govern and facilitate interaction on social network sites that the more empirically focussed Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 seek to document require a nuanced understanding of the privacy mechanisms available to users. These mechanisms are related to Goffman's framing of regions (or performance contexts), but are more broadly understood through a now common discussion around what constitutes 'private' and 'public'. In the

following chapter I enter into this discussion, although not in the same mode of developing theoretical frameworks as I have done in this chapter, but rather as a way of discussing methodology and the ethical challenges involved in this research. Thus, the following chapter acts both as a discussion of methodology and as an important contribution to the broader (highly contested) terrain of scholarship of youth research and the internet.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Ethical Challenges

My conclusion, in contrast to the undue length of this essay, is indeed brief. It can be expressed as a simple injunction: Respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect. This is what I think symbolic interactionism strives to do.

(Blumer 1969: 60)

The rapid and broad adoption of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook covered in Chapter 1 has garnered considerable attention from researchers in a broad array of disciplines, bringing with them a variety of approaches to research. The methods and ethical guidelines that constitute and inform this research are often contested and debated. Baym (2005), for instance, has explored at length – with no definitive outcome – whether or not ‘internet studies’ works as a discipline, or whether it sits across a variety of disciplines. It is clear, however, that there is a growing community of scholars who identify as internet researchers, and the infrastructure (conferences, departments, publications, associations) are, as Baym (2005) documents, beginning to emerge around that identification.

Just as individuals can draw on the conventions of social interaction they have been socialised into throughout their lives to develop strategies for ‘being online’ as discussed in the previous chapter, researchers can also reflect on the methods and ethics of ‘offline’ qualitative research to tailor appropriate methods of ‘online’ qualitative research: participant observation (Brotsky & Giles 2007; Williams 2007), interviews (Markham 1998; Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford 2004), focus groups (boyd 2008a), discourse analysis (Sharf 1999; Baym 2000), and so on. In this sense, again it is difficult (and perhaps not very useful)

to pin particular methods to 'internet research'. Rather, it may be more useful to consider the specific challenges and concerns that internet researchers face.

When qualitative researchers study the internet (or, for social scientists, the social interactions that occur through the internet), existing assumptions and traditional expectations can be challenged and problematised by the unique architecture of digitally mediated 'nonspace' (Markham 1998: 62). It should also be noted that quantitative researchers must also attend to the challenges and nuances of online survey work, for instance, but the relationship between researcher and participant and the role of space and place for qualitative researchers requires a different kind of reflexivity. Take, for example, the potentially persistent nature of conversations and interactions online. Whereas a conversation that takes place offline in an informal situation (away from voice recorders) persists only in echoes and memories, the interactions that take place on social network sites are persistent: 'what one says sticks around' (boyd 2011a: 46). Or, to be more precise, 'persistent' is the default setting. Limiting that persistence – by deleting wall posts, closely moderating comments on status updates, removing old messages, and so on – requires some labour. Offline, aside from the obvious examples of covert recordings or CCTV, the opposite is true. One must take note – written or mental – of an interaction, a conversation, for it to persist, or it fades in to the comforting oblivion of ephemeral exchanges. For social science researchers, the architecture of the internet – and specifically the persistent, searchable, and the variously 'accessible' nature of the digital – render it both a vast repository of data and also a useful 'place' for qualitative research to occur.

In this chapter, I undertake the necessary description of the research design, including a discussion on the recruitment of participants and the methods of the

research (involving discourse analyses of participants' profiles coupled with semi-structured, in-depth, in-person interviews), while also discussing the ethical challenges involved in the research as it progressed. The ethical challenges I encountered can be situated within a broad and still emerging body of literature that seeks to achieve Blumer's (1969: 60) goal, to 'respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect'. While developing such a stance in the frame of symbolic interactionism, as Blumer was, is possible because of a long tradition of ethical approaches to research, new media challenge many of these. Thus, in this chapter, my focus is on the ethical challenges of youth research involving social network sites through a specific example in my own research, while also attending to some of the more necessarily descriptive elements of a traditional methodology chapter.

I achieve this goal by dividing this chapter into three parts: in the first part, I describe my research design in detail, from the pilot study through to recruitment and my approach to participant-observation and in-depth interviews. In the second part, I establish the provocation that internet research methods that respect the 'empirical world' are problematised by a blurring of the public/private divide. In relation to the research design, in the final section I come to address the issues inherent in 'friending' participants on social network sites as a method for gaining access to profile data. I argue that this presents a problematic territory in which the two-way relationship between the researcher and the participant is destabilised as profiles become reciprocally available.

Research Design

Pilot Study

Prior to the doctoral research, for which fieldwork was undertaken from 2009 – 2010, a smaller pilot study was undertaken in 2007 in partial fulfilment of the award of my Bachelor of Arts with Honours. This pilot study was an important stage in the development of the subsequent doctoral research project, and in places I will draw on some of the findings from this earlier study to provide historical continuity. The pilot study involved ten MySpace users aged 18 to 24. In 2007, MySpace was the dominant social network site in Australia (and in the US and the UK), as Facebook had yet to enter into broad usage. Participants for this pilot study were recruited from my existing network of contacts on MySpace, all of whom were also members of my offline networks: friends of friends, retail work colleagues, and classmates.

My central argument arising from the pilot study was that a shift had occurred in the way identity-projects operated on the internet. Rather than the unfixed, experimental 'laboratories' of identity exemplified in MUDs by Turkle (1995), the rapid adoption of social network sites led to the development of more singular identity-projects through the profile. These profiles reflected offline versions of self rather than playful experiments with identity, which aligned with other research at the time that demonstrated young people were engaging with existing friends and peers online rather than 'networking' in the traditional sense of making new friends. In other words, because social network sites rendered performative spaces on the internet as less anonymous due to the common practice of using real names (rather than pseudonyms) and profile pictures of oneself, the scope for identity-play – experimenting with versions of self – was diminished. I will extend this argument in Chapter 4 when I discuss notions of

integrity and authenticity, but in relation to the pilot study, the threads that emerged from this research in 2007 provided a useful starting point for the doctoral research project which followed.

Participant Selection Criteria

Potential participants were invited to volunteer in the project based on three essential criteria. The first was age: all participants were born between 1982 and 1995. In the fieldwork phase of the project, this meant that the youngest participant was 15 years old and the oldest was 27. Age was specified here because of the project's focus on young people. My definition was necessarily broad, as I subscribed Wyn and White's (1997: 95) argument that there is often no 'definite point of arrival' in transition narratives. The process of 'becoming adult' is highly contested, multiple, non-linear, and varied, wrought by social and geographical positions. I understand youth as '*social process*' (Wyn & White: 1997: 147, italics original) rather than a developmental category or stage. In Harris' words, "youth" is a diverse and problematic category, and young people's identifications and experiences are cross-cut by distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and locale' (2010: 574).

As Frith (2005) points out, youth can describe a young person, an attitude, or even a social institution. Thus, while I had to identify some parameters for recruitment, they were as loose as possible, as I sought to include participants in their mid-teens through to their late-twenties. Younger participants were not sought for three reasons. First, while many pre-teens do have social network sites, it is against Facebook's terms of service, for instance, for anyone under thirteen to create a profile. While there is interesting work going on in this area (for example, boyd, Hargittai, Schultz & Palfrey 2011), this was beyond the

scope of my own research. Second, interviewing participants under fifteen would, according to the institutional ethics protocol of Griffith University, require explicit parental or guardian consent. For participants fifteen and over, however, consent was encouraged but not required. Rather, participants aged fifteen to seventeen were simply required to discuss their participation with their parents or guardians, and were able to provide their own consent for the actual participation in the research. Finally, the focus on youth – as a process of transition – was important for understanding the reflexive identity-work undertaken by people ‘gradually [being] prepared, or prepar[ing] themselves, to take up their allotted roles in adult life’ (Buckingham 2008: 4). That is, youth as a process of transition is often centrally concerned with the formation of identity-projects, and this thesis seeks to document how social network sites can operate for young people as a loci of ‘symbolic resources for constructing or expressing their own identities’ (Buckingham 2008: 5).

While there is important research to be done on other demographics and their engagements with these new forms of online sociality and for the lifelong reflexive project of self (as I will discuss further in Chapter 8), my intention here in focussing on ‘young people’ was to position my research in relation to the vast majority of existing research on social network sites, and also to provide some resistance to various generational discourses that frame young people as a) having no sense of integrity or control in their engagements online (which I refute in Chapter 4), and b) as being somehow inherently ‘good’ at using the internet, and ‘at home’ there as digital natives or ‘cyberkids’ (Holmes 2011). Similarly, even seemingly harmless implications that young people are attracted to the internet because they are ‘used to online culture’ (Woo-Young 2005: 927) are a fundamental part of the digital natives mythology. While in many ways this

discursive resistance is beyond the scope of this research (and could be another project in itself), it has acted as a useful impetus for the many conversations and discussions that have occurred on the margins of this project.

The second criteria informing the selection process was that each participant was currently residing on the Gold Coast, for reasons of access and convenience. Given the highly transient and ephemeral nature of the Gold Coast's population, which I will also discuss briefly below, pinning down this criteria beyond current residence would have been problematic. Some of the participants were only on the Gold Coast temporarily, while others had lived there their whole lives. The Gold Coast, at once a region and a city in South East Queensland on the mid-east coast of Australia, is perhaps best known as a tourism destination. However, in the last few decades, this tourism hotspot has encountered a strong surge of local development – in the order of a 3.5 percent increase in population each year since the early 1990s (KPMG and University of Queensland in Wise 2006: 177). As a relatively new yet quickly developing city with a largely transient population oriented towards construction and service industries, the Gold Coast is itself an interesting context for discussions of class, neighbourhood, community, belonging, identity and traditional correlations between social, cultural and economic capital. Within the context of this project, these issues become increasingly difficult to pin-down and work into a methodological approach. However, due concern has been given to providing a relatively representative group of young people from the Gold Coast from a variety of backgrounds and situations.

Given the attractiveness of the Gold Coast as a tourist destination, many international students choose to study on the Gold Coast as part of exchange

programs at Universities. Thus, several of the participants in my study were international exchange students from countries including Canada, the United States, England, Denmark and Malaysia. These participants had been Gold Coast residents for periods ranging from six months through to three years. Including these participants was a deliberate decision, so as to provide a sample that was as accurate as possible. As the Gold Coast is a tourist destination with a highly transient international population, it was necessary to include these elements in the project.

The third and final criterion was that each participant was required to be an active user of either MySpace or Facebook, accessing one or both at least weekly. These sites were clearly the dominant services. While others such as Friendster, Bebo and Orkut had some presence in Australia, they were not represented in my small group of participants. Only one participant mentioned Bebo, and another mentioned an online dating site which had a profile structure similar to a social network site, but was governed by different imperatives and conventions. In Australia, MySpace and Facebook were clearly the most dominant and mainstream sites. At the end of 2009, these sites accounted for 7.5 per cent of all Australian internet traffic, with Facebook ranking as the second most visited website in Australia and MySpace ranked as the tenth (Alexa 2010; Hitwise 2012). While other websites in the top fifty most popular websites in Australia like YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and LinkedIn can also be classified as social network sites, for different reasons they fall outside the scope of this project, as expanded upon in Chapter 1. Primarily, MySpace and Facebook are solely focused around profile-based performances of identity in which this project is centrally interested, whereas many other popular websites that might be aligned under a 'network site' banner have a particular focus, such

as sharing images or movies (YouTube, Flickr), blogging/micro-blogging (Blogger, WordPress) or professional networking (LinkedIn, Academia.edu). While these functions are often performed on MySpace and Facebook, they are usually secondary functions. Similarly, while sites like YouTube and Twitter do have user profiles, these profiles aren't the focus of the sites. While networks can be articulated on them and identity is performed in various ways, the nuances of these performances differ because of the medium.

Beyond these points of separation, further divisions become slippery. Twitter has recently implemented a more 'profile-based' architecture, Facebook has reinforced its focus on the 'news feed' and more recently the 'timeline' (both of which change the nature of the site), while MySpace has undergone several major changes in design in the years since this project begun, and new profile-based social network sites continue to reshape the social media landscape. Various services available only on smartphones such as Instagram, Path, Foursquare and so on will no doubt continue to play a role in this reshaping. As I will discuss further in Chapter 8, pinning down and categorising these sites in academic writing is notoriously rife with danger. By the time this writing reaches a reader it will likely be outdated. As Miller reflects:

By the nature of this social networking beast, we can assume that these observations will become outdated as Facebook evolves or is replaced. What remains is an anthropological study of people as social networking sites.

(Miller 2011: xii)

And so, I will simply say that I chose to focus on MySpace and Facebook because they were the most popular sites and that they fostered the most overt forms of 'identity performance', manifesting in online articulations of the reflexive project of self.

Recruitment

My first stage of recruitment was through Griffith University. By email, students that met the above criteria were contacted with a brief project description and invited to participate. Generally, this method was quite successful. For those who responded positively, a time and place was arranged for the interviews. This method of recruitment involved two main obstacles: diversity of age and diversity of educational background. University students are aged 17 and above, and are participating in a privileged system of education⁹. Thus, my task was to endeavour to also recruit school-aged participants (15 – 17 years old) and participants from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds. To this end, a process of selective snowballing was employed, where I asked existing participants to refer me to friends, siblings or other acquaintances who were aged 15 – 17, along with people who did not have a university background. Some local media interest in my research, involving radio and press interviews with journalists, also attracted enquiries from the public, and eventually lead to the recruitment of several other participants.

As Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) explain, although snowballing or ‘chain referral sampling’ appears to be ‘a method uniquely designed for sociological research because it allows for the sampling of natural interactional units’ (Coleman in Biernacki & Waldorf 1981: 141), it also comes with critical limitations. Biernacki and Waldorf assert that the methodological literature has failed to address these problems, presenting an all-too-pleasant interpretation of this form of recruitment:

⁹ However, it is also important to note that the expansion of higher education has led to some ‘democratising’ of the tertiary sector. Despite broadening participation, inequalities around access do persist (Henderson et al. 2007).

Through omission, the existing methodological literature suggests that the chain referral method of sampling is a self-contained and self-propelled phenomenon, in that once it is started it somehow magically proceeds on its own. This, however, is simply not the case; rather, the researcher must actively and deliberately develop and control the sample's initiation, progress, and termination.

(Biernacki & Waldorf 1981: 143)

Active and deliberate control was essential for the success of the referral process in my own project. Narrowing the scope of my recruitment mid-way through the fieldwork, through a process of selective snowballing, allowed for stronger diversity in my group of participants.

Participant Diversity

Amongst the thirty-three participants, the average age was 20.5. Six of the participants aged over 17 did not have a university background, and six were high-school students aged 15-17 (average age 16). The remaining twenty-one participants were either current university students or recent graduates. There were nineteen females and fourteen males. The participants with university backgrounds were from a variety of disciplines, including journalism, engineering, creative arts practice, humanities and social sciences, public relations and theatre. While I do not claim that this small sample is representative, due care and consideration has been given to ensuring some measure of diversity in the pool of participants, given the broad scope of the phenomenon (online identity performance) being studied. The anonymity of these individuals has been preserved throughout the research, and in this thesis participants have been assigned pseudonyms to maintain the de-identification process. See Appendix 2 for a list of participants.

Profile Observations

The first method of data collection involved observing the profiles of my participants. I conducted my observations in an informal way, attending to profile construction, content, articulations of social capital and other semiotic events. I took notes on profile pictures, autobiographical 'about me' content, exchanges through wall posts, uploaded photos and comments on photos, links, and so on. I spent 15-20 minutes observing the profiles of my participants prior to the interviews, and returned periodically after the interview and during subsequent stages of analysis, which I will describe in detail below.

When taken together, it is my argument that the elements of the profile constitute a form of identity performance. Observing the profiles of my participants allowed me to 'decode' (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays 2008: 291) the various discourses operating on the profiles of my participants, to better understand the conventions and practices of interaction and thus, necessarily, identity performance, occurring in these spaces. As Minichiello et al. (2008: 291) also point out, this method 'assumes that language and practice are the "readable" surface-level manifestations of hidden motivators'. To attend to the reflexive identity-work being done on these profiles, both through the creation of 'exhibitions of self' in Hogan's (2010) typology, or through more direct interactions articulated in these spaces, I broke the profile down to its core elements.

First, the display picture, a single image which represents users across the site, both on their own page as a header image and also on other pages where they write a comment or are otherwise 'present'. The profile picture is also part of a profile picture album, where previously used profile pictures are stored by

default, but can be removed. This album of profile pictures often serves as a highly curated collection of images that represent the profile author.

The second element was the about me or 'info' field. On MySpace, the about me content can usually be broken down into several smaller fields: the 'display header' next to the profile picture included sex, age and location, in addition to an optional notification for when the user was online (logged in to the site) and a 'mood indicator'; 'interests' with subheadings 'general', 'music', 'films', 'heroes' and others, usually containing images the profile author chose and autobiographical text or lists of films and bands or artists; 'details', including relationship status, what they were 'there for' (friends, networking, dating, or a relationship), sexual orientation, hometown, body type, ethnicity, religion, zodiac sign, whether they smoked or drank alcohol, whether or not they wanted children, their education level, their occupation and their annual income; and finally 'schools', where profile authors could list the schools they had attended. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, it was a common practice on MySpace to subvert this extensive listing of information by including false information, especially concerning income, but often including age and occupation, or by leaving these optional fields entirely blank, the latter being very common. In Chapter 4, based on interview data, I theorise that these kinds of practices work to trouble the expected nature of the site, creating a narrative of resistance to the form of the profile.

On Facebook, the way this information was organised and displayed changed several times over the course of the research and has subsequently changed several times since. For the majority of the time, however, this information was contained in an 'info tab', available along the top of the user's profile. Whereas on MySpace the about me content ran alongside the 'wall' (element four, which

I will discuss below), on Facebook the tabbed system separated the wall and the about me content on to different pages. The Facebook about me content was mostly similar to the MySpace about me content, but also included 'political views'.

The third element is the Friends list, which on MySpace was ranked in to a 'top friends' list, whereas on Facebook, it was not. However, in a later iteration of the site (after the fieldwork was complete), it became popular amongst some users to list their closest friends as 'family' (brothers, sisters, etc.) when Facebook implemented this feature of identifying family, thus introducing a form of Friendship hierarchy. It is also important to note that some participants 'hid' or otherwise rendered invisible their friends lists, by disabling them or listing no-one in their top friends on MySpace.

The fourth element of the profile was the 'wall', representing a 'common' space where Friends could leave a message for the profile author. Describing this element as a 'wall' was popularised on Facebook, but a similar system was in place on MySpace, where users would write on each other's profiles. According to boyd (2008a), the concept of the wall, which was first used on Friendster through the 'testimonials' function, was actually used by early adopters to write messages *about* the profile author whose page they were visiting, rather than directly to them. As the social practices in these spaces evolved, 'reciprocity motivated people to write creative testimonials back and forth, creating a form of conversation' (2008a: 7). Thus, the wall (after the testimonial) was used for communication between the 'visitors' to the profile and the profile's author. On MySpace, it was common for exchanges to be asynchronous and disconnected. That is, if John wrote on Jane's page, Jane would then go to John's page to respond to that comment, and so on. It was

sometimes difficult for others to follow the conversation if they weren't Friends with both John and Jane. This practice was carried over to Facebook, but Facebook eventually allowed people to comment on wall posts and status updates, with the latter being composed by the profile author and integrated in to the wall of the profile itself, along with links and videos, photo albums, notifications from Facebook applications, relationship status changes, new Friends, and so on. While both MySpace and Facebook had a similar function where other user's in the profile author's network could 'comment' or write on their profile, the conventions of interaction governing the MySpace page comments were quite different from the more advanced Facebook wall. For the purposes of this profile deconstruction exercise, however, they were grouped together.

These four elements of the profile, the display picture, the about me content, the friends list, and the wall, act as the most basic features of the profile. While some participants had additional elements, such as a tab on Facebook for applications and/or games or a series of blog posts on MySpace (replicated on Facebook in the form of 'notes'), these elements were not used or made visible as frequently, and existed rather as peripheral functions of the sites. Thus, my observations of profiles focussed mainly on the above four elements.

There were two other site elements that were regularly mentioned in interviews but were not part of my profile observations because they were private and not visible to me as a Friend of the participant: Instant Messaging (IM, or Facebook chat, usually synchronous) and Inboxing or Messaging (private messages, similar to email, more commonly asynchronous). Facebook later also offered some degree of integration between these mechanisms, where conversations undertaken via IM would also appear in the inbox 'history'.

These mechanisms were one-on-one (in the case of IM) or amongst small groups (as with emails via the inbox).

My participant-observation of the profiles was open-ended and primarily took the form of fieldnotes and screen-captures. I did not contribute to participants' profiles directly (by, for instance, 'liking' status updates¹⁰ or commenting on pictures), as my intention was to keep intrusion to a minimum. Out of concern for the anonymity of my participants, given the searchable and traceable nature of the content I was observing, I also decided not to include any direct excerpts gathered in the profile observation phase in my writing, but instead I used my notes to shape the subsequent in-person interviews. I took this step for several reasons. First, I was concerned about the potentially searchable nature of social network sites, and the prospect that any direct quotes used in my research publications could be linked back to participants' profiles (Brown & Vaughn 2011: 220).

Second, I was also concerned that once one of my participants added me to their Friends list and I was given access to their page, it was easy for my participants to forget I 'was there'. While blending into an environment is an important and established part of ethnographic research, even where participants are aware of your presence (see, for instance, Armstrong's 1993 work on 'football hooligans'), presence works somewhat differently in online social spaces. On Facebook, for instance, even though participants had friended me, amongst large groups of Friends (usually hundreds), my gaze was impossible to trace. Whereas Armstrong's (1993) participants could notice the

¹⁰ Rather than commenting on a Friend's activity, users can simply 'like' content (a status update, an image, a link) with a single click, registering interest/presence/approval.

careful attention he paid to their conversations in the pub, my participants could not know when I was viewing their interactions and when I was not.

Aside from the principal motivation of observing how the profiles of my participants worked, 'capturing performances, events, or situations as they happen, and the meanings of these events to the people involved' (Kruger 2008: 58), the secondary purpose of the profile observation phase of fieldwork was to inform and frame the second phase of the research: semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This second phase of the research also seeks to attend to Bennett's (2002: 452) call for youth researchers to recruit qualitative research methodologies that 'engage with the social actors at the centre of their work'. That is, rather than focussing on MySpace and Facebook themselves, this project has put the individuals that constitute these sites and shape social conventions in these spaces at the core of the research. To re-state a few lines from the framing work done in Chapter 1: individual sites can rise and fall in reach and popularity over a few short years, but tracing the conventions and strategies by which individuals present a sense of identity and belonging in online social spaces has a much longer trajectory.

Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews

Having friended and observed the profiles of participants in action, in the second phase of the fieldwork, that is, the physical in-person interviews, I was able to prompt participants based on my earlier observations. This allowed participants to describe their own practices and also (through my informed prompts) comment reflexively on elements of their profile they may have otherwise avoided or considered irrelevant. For example, many participants could easily engage in story-telling around initial adoption of a social network site or describe friending strategies (as I will discuss in Chapter 4), but were

often not able to (or were hesitant to) recall specific images on their profile or affiliations such as groups or interests. Using profile observation to inform the interviews allowed me to match and/or contrast my readings of profiles with my participants' readings of their own profiles. Having been granted access to their profiles for the observation, I was able, for instance, to probe around motivations for posting a certain status update or uploading a specific image, and ask about reactions to particular comments made by Friends. Having this background before the interview also allowed me to avoid relying too on self-reporting, bringing a different dimension of reliability into the fieldwork (Walter 2010: 154).

Interviews ranged in length from half an hour to just over an hour, with the average interview lasting around fifty minutes. All interviews were conducted in a one-on-one situation, except for a single interview that included two participants, Amanda (20) and David (23), who were a couple and were only willing to commit to a single interview slot between them. Locations for interviews were as neutral and quiet as possible, mainly cafes but also fast food restaurants and a library group work space for those recruited through Griffith University who preferred to meet on campus. With consent, interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and later transcribed and coded thematically using QSR NVivo version 8 software package.

Interviews were conducted in an egalitarian and conversational manner, with the intention of working towards a more neutral power relationship between myself as researcher and the participants. This allowed for the development of the all-important rapport which, as Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008) argue, is crucial for a successful interview:

Rapport with another person is essentially a matter of understanding that person's model of the world and communicating your understanding symmetrically... matching perceptual language, the images of the world, the speech patterns, pitch, tone, speed, the overall posture and the breathing patterns of the informant.

(Minichiello, Aroni & Hays 2008: 83)

The conversational, semi-structured approach to interviews was aided by an interview schedule divided in to four parts (see Appendix 1 for a blank copy of the most advanced interview schedule). Part one included general introductions, an ethics preamble, a discussion around the extent of access or participation, how the participant came to begin using MySpace and/or Facebook, and some broad discussion around common practices (what do you *do* on MySpace/Facebook?). The second part of the interview schedule was concerned with the performance of self on the profile, focussing on the performative elements discussed above (profile pictures, about me writing, the Friends list and the wall) including how the participant came to use a particular profile picture, and under what circumstances they decide to change, moderate, or update these elements.

Inviting participants to articulate their own identity-project, or asking questions about the mechanisms by which their identity is (or can be) constructed/performed/articulated, is clearly a difficult prospect that requires some creative interview work. I employed a third-person story-telling technique in this section for all interviews, where I asked the participant to envisage a person (named Sally) who had access to their profile but had otherwise never met or heard of them. Essentially, 'Sally' was a stranger who knew of the participant only through the information on their profile. I would then ask the participant to imagine how Sally might describe them. This enabled participants to describe their profile from a third-person perspective. Carrying on with the

'Sally technique', I then asked participants to imagine Sally was actually a writer working on a novel or a film, and that Sally was using everything she knew about the participant (from the participant's profile) to construct the main character in a story she was working on. What would the character be like? What would the story be about? Again, this gave participants a chance to reflect on their profile from a third-person perspective while going the extra step of requiring that perspective to be wrought in to some kind of narrative.

Also in this part of the interview schedule, I asked participants to imagine their profile was saved and stored in a kind of time capsule for ten years, un-touched. I then invited participants to imagine what it would be like re-discovering their profile in its current form ten years on. This line of inquiry sought to engage participants in story-telling around the dynamic nature of identity, and to situate their profiles in a temporal context. This, after all, is one the criticisms of young people and their use of social media – that they have no sense of how their presence and sense of a 'digital trace' might appear or be framed differently in the future. This is a thread I return to in Chapter 4. In retrospect, this line of inquiry also serves to test the usefulness of Hogan's (2010) conceptualisation of profiles as 'exhibitions' of self rather than as performances.

The third part of the interview schedule was concerned with belonging. This primarily took the form of probing for information on affiliations made visible on the profile, such as 'groups' that participants had joined or linked to. This part of the schedule also included a discussion of whether or not MySpace and/or Facebook fostered a sense of belonging or connection for participants. The fourth part of the schedule focussed on friendship: how many Friends the participant had in their network/s, how they determined who to add or accept, whether or not they added people to their network who they hadn't met in-

person ('internet Friends'), and how they felt about the ways in which interaction mediated by a social network site had an effect on their friendships. Subsequent discussions involved practices for dealing with unsolicited or unwelcome contact. Participants were also encouraged to articulate a 'conceptualisation' of their network, through a question around 'closeness' to Friends. This allowed participants to describe the presence of any hierarchies in their network in their own language: family, acquaintances, work friends, best friends, close friends, uni friends, school friends who I don't talk to anymore, friends of friends I haven't met, people I'm attracted to, first, second and third 'tier' friends, main group of friends, core friends, and so on. Some were detailed and specific, while others offered nuanced conceptualisations of their network. Finally, when these four parts of the schedule had been attended to, there was a wrap-up or a 'clearing-house' (Minichiello, Aron & Hays 2008: 113) question where participants were invited to add anything they thought we had not covered or anything they would like to go back to.

Consistent with the open and conversational approach of the semi-structured, in-depth interview, the interview schedule described above was adaptable and dynamic both within interviews themselves and across the course of the fieldwork. Within interviews, I explained to participants that the schedule served to give me reminders and to provide some parameters, but that deviation and story-telling was certainly encouraged. In other words, I wanted to make it clear that the schedule was only a rough guide and that they should not feel constrained or as though we weren't 'on topic'. This resulted in interviews unfolding quite differently, some moving through the schedule in a non-linear fashion (jumping from part to part and back again), while others moved through the schedule as described above. Participants often raised issues I hadn't

considered earlier, and these diversions were encouraged, leading to many of the more important findings discussed in Chapters 4 to 7. Where participants raised issues that I thought should be addressed in subsequent interviews, the schedule was amended and updated. Schedules also included participant-specific notes based on my profile observations, mainly in the form of prompts for me to enquire about a particular semiotic event, a practice I didn't understand or a social exchange I wanted the participant to comment on. In this way, I was able to draw on my earlier profile observations in the interview so the participant could describe what I had observed in their own words. This also gave the participant the opportunity to signal discomfort around a topic (and ask that we not discuss or include it) and to connect one instance of something I noted in my observations to other instances in a more sustained example.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken roughly in four stages, beginning with two informal stages of reflective analysis, then proceeding to a more formal process of coding and systematising data, and culminating in process of translating themes into narratives and arguments. I borrow from Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor's (2012: 159) framing of data analysis as 'not primarily about tuning coding schemes or tweaking data analysis software packages... [but] about finding, creating, and bringing thoughtful, provocative, productive ideas to acts of writing'.

The first stage of analysis occurred before the interviews themselves¹¹, in the profile observation phase of the fieldwork. This stage involved informal reflections and note-taking on my readings of the participant's profile(s), akin to

¹¹ With the exception of the participants aged under 18, as per the discussion in the section titled 'research challenges and solutions'.

field notes from participant observation. I took my cue here from Mills' (1959: 214) theory of the sociological imagination, which encourages the student of sociology to 'think in terms of a variety of viewpoints and in this way to let your mind become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible'. In observing the interactions that took place on the profile(s) of my participants, I imagined how different individuals in the participant's network of Friends might read certain performances or semiotic events. For instance, how might a parent read a photo of a drunken night out? Or how might a colleague from work read a wall post made by a doting parent? Why did the participant choose that image as their profile picture? How do I, as an outsider to the participant's network, read an invocation of a particular band or film or novel on one my participant's profiles, in the context of a broader identity project? I took notes to this effect during this stage of the analysis that, as I have explained above, informed the development of individualised interview schedules.

The second stage of analysis took place during the interviews themselves. I took brief notes during the interviews in a column in the interview schedule (see Appendix 1), flagging particular expressions or terms the participant used, or noting experiences or narratives that I wanted to return to, but did not want to disrupt the flow of the interview for. Even before transcription, this *in situ* analysis also allowed me to begin coding what I was discussing with my participant. Especially later in the fieldwork, after I had begun transcribing and coding earlier interviews, I would link the current interview to themes that had emerged in those earlier interviews. For example, when a participant would begin to describe friending strategies, I would put an asterisk in the notes column and write 'friending strategies', reminding me that at this point in the schedule (even if unrelated to the broader section of the schedule we were in)

the participant was describing his or her strategy for friending other users on MySpace or Facebook (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5). Although less formal than the systematising of data that occurred in the next step, this *in situ* coding worked to help me to, in the words of Boellstorff's et al. (2012: 165), 'become friends with' and 'immerse' myself in the data.

The third stage of data analysis was more formal, and occurred alongside the transcription of interviews. As I transcribed, I also systematised my data by tagging and coding entire sections, sentences, or even single words. My coding schema ranged from micro details through to broader macro themes. Micro details included tags such as 'quantity of Friends' (coded to numbers or estimates of numbers of Friends associated with a network, eg. '352' or 'about 400') and 'adoption' (estimations of when participants registered their account with MySpace or Facebook, or when their account was registered for them, coded to dates or approximations like 'about two years ago' or 'when I was in grade 11'). The broader macro themes I coded included 'quality of friendships', 'negative stories', 'embarrassing stories', 'MySpace vs. Facebook', 'identity performance', 'multiplicity', 'authenticity' and so on. In-between the micro details and the broader macro themes, I also coded for descriptions of 'functionality', the appearance of 'parents' in experiences of social network site usage, discussions of 'profile pictures/images', and so on. NVivo allowed me to assign 'nodes' to each of my tags or codes, and then associate nodes with sections, sentences or single words within the transcription. I was then able to group together these sections/sentences/words by selecting a single node. For example, if I wanted to group all responses to one of my closing questions 'what would your life be like without MySpace/Facebook?', I could select that node and all sections I had associated with that node would be displayed, producing

'piles' (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 167) of data around a specific theme or idea. This stage of the analysis was open-ended, and I was coding and re-coding transcripts into the final edits of the thesis as I reflected on new connections and re-discovered narratives I had overlooked previously.

With these foundations of the analysis in place, I was able to move into the final and most important stage of analysis, turning themes into narratives and arguments by writing. However, as I hint at above, this process was neither linear nor neat, and there was considerable overlap between the third and fourth stages of analysis I describe here. The fourth stage of analysis began when I was ready to contextualise and discuss my 'piles' of data (now systematised thematically) by copying and pasting sections of interview transcripts into the Word documents that would become the chapters that constitute the empirical sections of this thesis. Using the voices of my participants alongside quotes and paraphrased ideas from the literature I had been reading, I was able to make broader theoretical and conceptual points in my writing. Eventually, the original 'piles' of data with which I began in a blank Word document were reduced to a few lines that most clearly conveyed the point I was drawing out of an interview. The contextualisation and synthesising that goes on in this final stage of analysis, which is constituted by the writing itself, also draws on the previous three stages of analysis, weaving eventually into the ideas and arguments presented in the following chapters.

In summary, thirty-three participants were recruited aged 15-27 who were active users of either MySpace or Facebook and currently residing on Australia's Gold Coast. While a small qualitative group cannot represent a diverse sample, care was taken to make the group as diverse as possible in terms of age, gender, and educational background. Fieldwork took place in two

phases: first, friending participants and observing their profiles on MySpace and/or Facebook; and second, using those observations to inform semi-structured, in-depth interviews that sought to explore identity performance, the ways in which belonging played out through the profile, and practices around determining Friendship.

With that detailed understanding of the research design, I now turn to the ethical challenges of access to social network sites and consider the blurring of the public/private divide in these spaces. I bring these threads together in the final section by explaining a particular challenge I encountered that affected and jeopardised my research design which appeared neat and contained at the outset, but which quickly became problematic as my fieldwork progressed.

Internet Research Ethics Beyond a Public/Private Divide

Pioneered by research discussed in previous chapters, including Rheingold's (1994) and Baym's (1995) work on online communities, and Turkle's (1995) work on online forms of identity, internet research has been described both as a discipline that is not a discipline (Baym 2005), and as a useful element of any ethnographic research concerning contemporary society (Hine 2011). Internet research, then, is broad ('transdisciplinary' according to Hunsinger 2005) and critical to understanding societies for which the internet has become part of the everyday. Internet research can be understood as a component of other disciplines – media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, and so on – or as a 'new' field, with the organisational hub being the Association of Internet Researchers, that borrows from existing disciplines. However this research is framed, and regardless of what kind of departments or organisations internet researchers find themselves in, it is clear that if we are to

keep using the traditional theories (discussed in the previous chapter) and methods of enquiry (as in this chapter) to better understand society, some 'untraditional' looking or thinking or reflecting needs to occur:

We need not jettison useful communication theories when we wish to understand the new media ... we should take advantage ... of the new media to further specify and modify those theories ... The new media need to be included in traditional communication research, but we need to look at those traditional theories untraditionally.

(Rice & Williams in Jones 1999: x)

In other words, critical reflection is essential for any research design, but when transposing traditional methods to new sites of mediation, that reflection also needs to attend to the challenging nuances of 'new media' without doing away with wealthy traditions of social and cultural research.

Researching Social Network Sites and Young People

While the rise in popularity of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook has been particularly pronounced since 2007 (Livingstone 2008), earlier social network sites, such as Friendster, have been attracting the attention of internet researchers and youth studies scholars since 2003 (boyd 2008a: 132). From the earliest forms of internet research on Usenet and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Domains) through to current research on new and still emerging forms of social media, the ethical dimensions of this research have been highly contentious and often debated. While social network sites are certainly not populated entirely by young people, much of the research that investigates these sites is centred on young users, especially students (boyd 2006, 2007, 2008a; Dobson 2008; Joinson 2008; Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler 2008; Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer & Christakis 2008; Tufekci 2008; Notley 2009; West, Lewis & Currie 2009; Robards &

Bennett 2011). In Livingstone's words, 'young people are in the vanguard of social networking practices' (2008: 394), and thus their practices receive the most scrutiny, consistent with a broader 'fixation' (Cieslik 2003: 2) on young people in both scholarly work and in popular discourse. For researchers based in universities, young people (college and university students) are also much more accessible. As I have indicated in the previous section, I have attempted to move beyond this population to include participants with a broader set of backgrounds.

At the nexus of this interest in both young people and in emerging forms of sociality on the internet lies a research terrain rife with ethical challenges. The central challenge addressed in this chapter is the blurring between 'public' and 'private' information and social interactions on the internet, both for young people themselves as they develop strategies for 'being' on the internet, and also for researchers who must develop ethically sound methods of studying the development of those strategies and conventions.

As Wakeford explains, 'webpages are simultaneously computer code, cultural representations and the outcome of skilled labour [... they are] complex artefacts that can be written, read, used or consumed' (2004: 35). Beyond this, it has also been argued that homepages (Cheung 2004) and to a greater extent profiles on social network sites (Pearson 2009; Robards 2010a) both 'represent the individual and serve as the locus of interaction' (boyd 2011a: 43). Thus, these 'webpages' can be understood as spaces in which identity is constructed and performed, where social interactions occur, are articulated, made visible, and subsequently archived by default: 'what one says sticks around' (boyd 2011: 46). Should research that investigates what these profiles contain be governed by the ethics of archival research, then? Or, as dynamic spaces which

are constantly revised, maintained and (re)produced by their creators (profile authors) and those connected to and permitted to contribute to the profile (Friends writing on profile walls, commenting on images and status updates, posting links and so on), should research in these spaces be governed by the more stringent ethical guidelines of in-person ethnographic research involving interviews and observation? Or, do we need a new set of ethical guidelines? If this information, these interactions, cannot be governed by a public/private dichotomy, as I will argue, how does the researcher navigate issues of 'ownership', for example, in these spaces? Furthermore, if access to these profiles can only be granted through a process of mutual 'friending' between participant and researcher (where profiles are set to 'private'), how does this kind of research disturb the researcher-participant relationship? What kind of ethical challenges does disturbing this relationship raise? These questions are relevant not only for protecting the participant, but also the researcher, whose own profile is made visible to the participant in the friending process. Thus, the researcher's own potentially pre-existing, potentially 'private' online conduct is brought into the research scenario, challenging long-standing notions of 'professional' and objective distance between researcher and participant, and requiring researchers who use social network sites in their research to re-think the formation of 'ethically responsible' research relationships.

New Media, New Ethics? Undoing the Private/Public Dichotomy

The Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC 2007), which informs my own practice as a researcher in Australia and sets the guidelines for institutional approval of my research, identifies four key principles by which the ethical conduct of research can be assessed. First, the research must have merit and be conducted with integrity. This includes the

justification for the project, the proven nature and appropriateness of research design, appropriate dissemination of results, and reflection upon the presence of any conflicts of interest including research sponsorship. The second principle is justice, concerned with the grounds upon which participants are included and excluded (recruitment), reflection upon the involvement of over-researched populations, access to research, the burden on participants versus the flow of benefits (for participants, for the 'community', for 'knowledge'), the fair treatment of participants, consideration of negative social justice impacts of the research, and participant access to results. The final two principles are particularly salient for the argument being advanced in this chapter: beneficence and respect for persons. In relation to beneficence, the researcher must justify the risks and burdens of the research, seek to minimise any harm involved (even where 'harm' might not be anticipated), ensure participants are recruited through a process of informed consent, while also considering the ongoing responsibility of researchers beyond the formal life cycle of the research. The fourth and final key principle is respect for persons: respecting the intrinsic value of people, respecting privacy, respecting the right to choose to participate, and respecting cultural beliefs and protocols. Involving this long list of considerations in the research process is, I would argue, central to the conduct of 'sound ethical research'. While I do not have the scope to explore all of these dimensions in this chapter in relation to research involving social network sites, I will touch on several, especially those concerned with privacy and consent.

Probyn and Lumby (2003: 10) argue that, in a 'use it or lose it' scenario, ongoing ethical reflection is central to good practice. Like servicing and maintaining a car, the ethical conduct of scholarship is an open-ended process. It does not end when a research project is designed or when institutional

clearance is given or even when a project is finished; nor can ethical reflection end after the research is written-up and eventually published or otherwise disseminated. Rather, the ethics of scholarship should be subject to ongoing scrutiny, reflection, and revision. It is clear that while many of the methods of offline ethnographic research – and the ethics that govern those methods – can be transferred in some way (or many ways) to research involving social relations mediated by the internet, as I have previously argued, there are limitations and necessary points of revision. Fernback (1999: 203), for instance, asks how sociological research might adapt to ‘the bodiless province of cyberspace’. In relation to her work on ‘cybercommunity’, she goes on to note that the spatial metaphors developed around ‘cyberspace’ as ‘the town hall, the public sphere, the virtual agora’ (1999: 204) are part of an attempt to make new media familiar, and thus assist in the transference of methods and ethics to research that engages with these ‘places’ that are not places. However, these metaphors of place reduce a highly complex and dynamic system of sociality to conceptualisations that do not fit. There are bodies involved in online social interactions, but they aren’t always next to each other. The cues of social interaction that allow individuals to ‘go on in each other’s presence’ (Bauman 1996: 19), then – when that presence is not physical, and sometimes synchronous, sometimes asynchronous (boyd 2008b: 44) – must be expressed and mediated in different ways, as with social interactions mediated by a handwritten letter or a telephone. In short, research involving social interactions mediated online should recruit the methods and the spirit of the ethical principles outlined above while also being sensitive to these points of distinction. This enables an openness to revising research design, especially

when concerning notions of public and private with which internet users are still coming to terms.

Stern (2004) argues that the slippery nature of the public/private dichotomy makes internet research particularly problematic in ethical terms. For Stern, researchers using the internet to interact with participants (by email, by video chat, and so on) should be governed by the same ethical standards that govern offline, in-person research. However, for researchers using the internet to study communications and social exchanges themselves, the ethical considerations are more complex:

One side of the controversy encompasses those who believe Internet communications that are publicly accessible are “public” communications. On the other side are those who contend that simply because communications are publicly accessible does not mean that online authors consider their online discourse to be “public” information, or that they recognise the extent to which their communications can be accessed by others.

(Stern 2004: 276)

Thus, while researchers studying communications and social exchanges themselves may not be engaging directly with another individual (a participant), the framing of public and private is a matter of context and consent. Stern goes on to claim that young people (children and adolescents, in her terms) are potentially more at-risk here because they are less able to ‘fully grasp the concept of “public” in the same way we might expect adults to’ (2004: 277). In the decade since Stern’s research on young people and personal homepages, the internet has changed dramatically. While sharing some similarities, social network sites such as Facebook are also very different to the traditional homepages in Stern’s study, especially in terms of the expectations and

assumptions around privacy controls and thus what constitutes the 'private' versus the 'public' domain.

As I discuss further in Chapter 5 in relation to the theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter 2, the young people in this research project are developing highly strategic practices around managing their 'audiences' on social network sites. These emerging strategies, that require a nuanced understanding of the privacy mechanisms available to users, partly contradict Stern's earlier argument that young people may have more difficulty grasping the difference between public and private forms of sociality on the internet. Admittedly, however, Stern's framing of young people was somewhat more narrow (children and adolescents) than my own, but I would argue, nevertheless, that these kinds of discourses still obstruct a highly strategic set of practices around managing a sense of audience and space that occur on these sites.

The closed structure of Facebook itself further blurs distinctions between public and private. For example, even 'public' ('everyone') profiles on Facebook now require a password to access them in full. While acquiring a Facebook account is trivial, and even with more than 955 million active users on the site (Facebook.com, 2012), this form of 'open profile' is not truly public. Then there are the profiles that are accessible to an entire network (everyone who is associated with a particular university, city or country and so on) and those profiles open to 'friends of friends'. While these profiles are not 'private', as I will discuss below through Zimmer's (2010) work, nor should they be understood as 'public' or 'open' for research purposes. Beyond these privacy settings, there are an array of customisable options which allow Facebook users to make certain parts of their profile visible to some users and not others, resulting in a

diverse spectrum of privacy practices. Thus, Facebook's structure troubles the distinction between public and private even further than Stern's (2004) above framing of this already problematic dichotomy. Researchers making use of sites like Facebook, then, must attend even more closely to the ethical dimensions of their research. I would argue that a researcher must first spend time as a participant in these spaces, familiarising themselves with the conventions of interaction, the mechanisms of control and the nuances of 'privacy', before they can adequately design research engaging with these spaces, whether in a qualitative or quantitative capacity. As the following case makes clear, thinking through these issues requires a familiarity with these sites of mediation with which many researchers and institutional ethics committees or review boards are still coming to terms.

The 'T3' Project and the Use of In-network Research Assistants

In 2008, a North American research team released a large dataset on a cohort of 1640 college students containing information taken or interpreted from their Facebook profiles, including 'gender, race/ethnicity ... socioeconomic status ... social relationships ... [and other] demographic traits' (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer & Christakis 2008: 330) along with information on 'home state, nation of origin, political views, sexual interests, college major, relational data, and cultural interests' (Zimmer 2010: 321). While the researchers on the project did gain approval from both Facebook and the college in question (later revealed to be Harvard, despite attempts by the researchers to anonymise the data), they did not seek permission to collect the data from the students whose profiles they were accessing. Zimmer (2010) conducts a thorough critique of the ethical dimensions of the research, providing the following summary:

The events surrounding the release of the Facebook data in the “Tastes, Ties, and Time” [T3] project – including its methodology, its IRB [Institutional Review Board] approval, the way in which the data was released, and the viewpoints publicly expressed by the authors – reveals *considerable conceptual gaps* in the understanding of the privacy implications of research in social networking spaces. As a result, threats to the privacy of the subjects under study persist, despite the good faith efforts of the T3 research team.

(Zimmer 2010: 323, italics added)

One of the central concerns raised by Zimmer in his critique, and a concern that relates to the important public/private thread of this chapter, is the use of ‘in-network’ research assistants (RAs). That is, those RAs, who collected the data, were also members of the Harvard network on Facebook. According to Zimmer, the researchers concede that ‘one RA might have different access to a student’s profile than a different RA, and being “public” or “private” on Facebook is merely relative to that particular RAs level of access’ (2010: 318). Zimmer goes on to explain that some students in the study may have granted members of their Harvard network access to profile information that would not be accessible to a more general internet-using ‘public’. This level of access doesn’t necessarily require users to have friended each other, although this process generally implies even greater access. In other words, using these in-network RAs to collect data for the project gave Lewis et al. (2008) access to information that may not have been publically available:

The RAs, employed for the project, being from the same network as the subject, would be able to view and download a subject’s profile data that was otherwise restricted from outside view. Thus, her profile data – originally meant for only those within the Harvard network – is now included in a dataset released to the public.

(Zimmer 2010: 318)

As Zimmer goes on to discuss, this method of research is at the very least ethically problematic if not completely flawed. The involvement and complicity of

Harvard's Institutional Review Board – charged with ensuring research is conducted ethically and responsibly – also points towards what Zimmer refers to as a 'conceptual gap' (2010: 323) in the understanding of the privacy implications associated with research involving social network sites. What Lewis et al. and the Harvard IRB understood to be public information failed to take into account the 'contextual' nature of that information, best described by Nissenbaum (2004; 2010) through her framework of contextual integrity: 'there are no arenas of life not governed by norms of information flow, no information or spheres of life for which "anything goes." [... Almost everything] happens in a context not only of place but of politics, convention, and cultural expectation' (Nissenbaum 2004: 137). In other words, on Facebook, what may be freely available to one user (as a 'Friend', or a 'Friend of a Friend', or a member of a network), may not be available to another user or an individual without a Facebook account. As I will continue to discuss in the following section, social network sites blur the private/public dichotomy. Thus, traditional models of research require ongoing revision if they are to be applied to research involving social network sites such as Facebook in a manner that holds to the ethical principles of beneficence and respect.

Friending Participants: Audiences and Context

'Friendship' on a social network site does not equate precisely to more traditional understandings of the term friendship, which, again, is a point I will develop further in Chapter 5. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is sufficient to say that in contrast to a traditional notion of the friend, which describes some kind of closeness or intimacy, social network sites collapse various social relationships into the single category of Friend, including parents, colleagues, casual acquaintances, lovers, friends of friends and so on.

'Networked publics', according to boyd, 'force everyday people to contend with environments in which contexts are regularly colliding' (boyd 2011: 50).

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework relies on a separation of audiences to ensure an appropriate social performance from context to context. Social network sites, especially Facebook, collapse these performative contexts and audiences, troubling Goffman's framework for the presentation of self. Thus, new audience segregation and impression management strategies must be developed. Hogan (2010), discussed in the previous chapter, introduces a third party in to this process of mediation, suggesting that Facebook (or its servers) 'knows who is considered an appropriate audience member for this content and who is not' (Hogan 2010: 380). It is precisely this failure to attend to the contextual nature of the information and social exchanges mediated on (and by) Facebook that caused Lewis et al. (2008) and the 'T3' project team to inadequately address the ethical principles of beneficence and respect for persons in relation to their research.

For young users of these sites, who may wish to carve out a private space of their own online away from authority and familial figures (Stern 2004: 280; boyd 2007), the collapse of those performative contexts described above can be problematic. In their study of 16 London-based undergraduates, for example, West, Lewis and Currie (2009) found some apprehension amongst their participants when asked if they would friend a parent on Facebook: 'It... seems so awkward [...] I'd be like, "Look guys, I don't want to be rude, but I think it's an invasion of my privacy if you're looking at my Facebook profile, because it's to do with my friends"' (Participant 'Sophie' in West, Lewis & Currie 2009: 620). It is my argument that these spaces are, for many users, at least partially private, evidenced by the strategic ways in which young people's online social networks

are largely made up of people they already know (boyd 2007a; Joinson 2008; Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler 2008). In other words, sites like MySpace and Facebook are not necessarily places for 'networking' in the traditional sense of the word, where the performance of self may be framed in more 'public' terms, but instead they are often regarded by users as places where existing networks are articulated, strengthened and made visible (boyd & Ellison 2007). How, then, did the presence of a researcher – such as myself – affect the space? Were participants open to friending me on Facebook? What are the ethical challenges involved in friending research participants? In the following section, through a reflection on my own qualitative research project, I offer some preliminary answers to these questions.

Research Challenges and Solutions

While the process of applying for various levels of institutional ethics clearance to conduct this research was time-consuming (mainly because of the inclusion of the 15 to 17-year-old participants), in retrospect it was also a rewarding process and an important part of my development as a researcher. However, despite the great care taken in the planning of this research, there was one significant ethical challenge that emerged in the course of the research that I did not anticipate: the extent to which the spaces I was investigating could be understood as personal and private. It wasn't until after my initial research design that literature began to emerge about the intimate nature of certain online social spaces, such as LiveJournal (Hodkinson & Lincoln 2008) and social network sites (Pearson 2009). At this point, to best demonstrate the challenge I am describing here, I would like to introduce the voices of my participants. My participants were instrumental in shaping my ongoing research

design, and I introduce them here to provide context for the challenge I am seeking to address¹².

As I entered into conversations with my participants, and as they described the strict practices of control they exerted over their profiles (especially on Facebook), it became clear that being granted access to these spaces was a privilege:

I'm very picky with who I accept as a Friend. If I don't know them or if I haven't met them or if they're a friend of a friend who I've heard of but I haven't met, I don't accept them... because my personal information is quite detailed.

(Jamie, 27)

While not all participants were as 'picky' about friending practices, all but two of the thirty-three participants agreed that MySpace and Facebook were places for friends, not for meeting new people. Even participants with large networks, such as Eric (20), described Facebook as 'documenting real life' rather than as a tool to be used to meet new people. Of the 525 Friends Eric had on Facebook, he reported that there were only five he had never met before and a further 25 to 50 he had only met once or twice. Catherine (20) had a similar approach to meeting new people on Facebook: 'I don't know, I just don't think I could be Friends with someone I haven't met face-to-face'. It is clear here that Catherine makes little distinction between 'Facebook Friends' and a more traditional understanding of friendship. While some participants also reported this lack of distinction, others very clearly distinguished between two different understandings of Friendship, although what constituted a 'Facebook Friend' and a 'real' or 'offline' friend varied greatly.

¹² For a list of participants, see Appendix 2.

Simon (15), for example, would generally only friend people he knew offline and considered a friend, but his understanding of the friending process was not static. He would friend people to gain access to their profiles, then remove them later in what I will explain in Chapter 5 as a 'Friendship cull':

Int.: How many friends do you have on MySpace?

Simon: 650. But I don't know... I know more than 80 per cent.

Int.: And those other 20 per cent... how would you describe them?

Simon: Just bands I like and stuff. I don't have that many, but... also random people I have to go through and delete.

Int.: Why did you add them in the first place?

Simon: Just adding them to see if I knew them at all or if I forgot or whatever...

Thus, even Simon's relatively relaxed friending strategy (when compared to the more 'picky' approach of older participant Jamie, for example) still frames his profile as a reasonably closed, personal space. Clearly, this presents a challenging ethical dilemma for the researcher who seeks to enter these spaces. Unlike entering a physical personal space that can be 'tidied up' or easily modified for impression management, the profile of a social network site is a highly dynamic space with which potentially hundreds of the participant's Friends are engaged, both synchronously and asynchronously (boyd 2008: 44).

To return to an earlier thread in this chapter, scholarship has often attempted to make sense of these 'places that are not places' by invoking metaphors of place with which we are more familiar (Fernback 1999; Hodkinson & Lincoln 2004; Pearson 2009). As I discovered, however, these conceptualisations fell short of effectively describing the 'partially private' yet archival nature of the profiles on MySpace and Facebook. Rather than mapping on to the physical

spaces with which we are familiar, online social spaces do require radically different conceptualisations, especially when it comes to their private/public nature. While this might appear to reinforce the online/offline binary I have flagged as being at least partly false, it is the 'spaces' (that are not really spaces or places) that are new, not the interactions.

Changes in Research Design

After several interviews, preceded by the friending process, I decided to incorporate two changes into my research design: first, a brief discussion towards the beginning of my interview schedule about my 'presence' in the participant's online social space; and second, I decided not to friend the six 15-17 year-old participants or conduct the participant-observation described in phase one of the data collection above with these six younger participants.

In response to the first change, none of my participants reported any concerns about friending me – some even actively sought me out and initiated the friending process once I began recruitment – but I reminded them that as with their consent to participate in the interview, they could also withdraw their 'Friendship consent' at any time by 'de-friending me'. Most found this quite humorous, and generally this served as a useful ice-breaker, but I believe it was also an important step in coming to terms with this particular ethical scenario. In the year since the end of my fieldwork, 9 of the 27 participants I had friended on Facebook had either de-friended me or left the social network site. None of the participants I friended on MySpace de-friended me, although as I have discussed elsewhere (Robards 2012a), this is likely due to a broader move away from MySpace towards Facebook and thus a disinvestment in MySpace or a reduction in the active management of the space.

The second change in my research design, not friending the six 15 to 17 year-old participants or conducting the online participant-observation and discourse analyses of these six, was more difficult. On the one hand, this a) meant I would not have access to the profiles of these participants, an element of the research that was important in the interview process; and b) meant I had to rely more heavily on self-reporting. On the other hand, this allowed me to avoid any invasiveness that my presence in these spaces (even as a passive observer) would create.

I was guided in this decision by a conversation I had with a teacher close to one of the participants in the lead-up to the first of six interviews with participants under 18. This teacher had referred some of her students to my study, and had facilitated the acquisition of informed consent from both the participants and their parents. Although I held a 'Blue Card', issued by the State government that permitted me to work with young people under 18 in Queensland, and although the teacher assured me that she 'trusted me', she also advised me that it was her policy to leave the door of the room in which the interview was to take place, ajar. Leaving the door ajar did not mean that she was present during the interview, but meant that the room in which the interview took place was not closed off. The conduct of both the young participant and myself was, in this sense, partially visible, but our conversation was still one-on-one.

At the time I accepted this without a second-thought as standard and routine, but in retrospect I reflected upon how this consideration – leaving a space open, so that my conduct and the conduct of the young person could be peripherally visible to parents or other guardians – might translate to an online social space. Similarly, the clause in my informed consent package made allowances for the

presence of a parent or guardian in the interview (for participants under 18) if the participant wanted them present. While no participants accepted this invitation, I also realised that there was no simple translation of this allowance to the online social spaces I was investigating. I could not ask the participants to also friend their parents or guardians, so they could then subsequently have access to the space of the research as young people often go online to get away from the parental gaze (Stern 2004; boyd 2007a; West, Lewis and Currie 2009). Subsequently, although it would have an impact on data collection, I decided that not friending these six younger participants was the most 'ethically sound' solution to the dilemma, adhering to the principles of integrity, beneficence, and respect to persons that governed my research and the institutional approval of my research.

The Challenges of Being an Insider

In Bennett's words, 'knowledge of and familiarity with local surroundings has substantially assisted researchers both in their quest to gain access to particular social groups and settings and in knowing which roles to play once access has been achieved' (2002: 460). Being an 'insider' affords the researcher with a particular set of advantages, but also presents a series of challenges. Participants may, at the very least, take some knowledges for granted, and at the more extreme, feel intimidated by or oppositional to another insider (Hodkinson 2005: 140).

As a young person myself (older than most of my participants at the time of the research, but not all), and as an active user of both MySpace and Facebook at the time of the research, it was apparent that my insider status played some role in the development of rapport and with my participants being 'at ease' with me as the researcher and also as a Friend on either MySpace or Facebook. I

knew what kind of conduct was appropriate and what kind of conduct would disrupt the social conventions of 'contextual integrity' (Nissenbaum 2004) of these spaces. However, my insider status also presented an additional challenge unique to the medium of social network sites.

In friending my participants on Facebook, not only was I given access to their profiles, but they were also given access to mine. On MySpace, creating a research only profile was not an issue. Facebook's (2010) terms of service, however, prohibit the creation of more than one personal profile (a 'research only' profile, for instance, would be a violation of these terms). Thus, I had to use my own personal profile for the research. This generated an ethical concern around what constitutes an appropriate relationship between researcher and participant. As set out in the Australian National Statement on Ethical Research (referred to above), 'where [relationships that] threaten to compromise the research role [develop], researchers must consider whether to modify those relationships, or to modify or even discontinue the research' (NHMRC 2007). In the interests of maintaining a professional research relationship, I limited the information my participants could access on my profile to only basic details including my name, my profile pictures (a small, carefully managed album of images I had used as profile or display pictures), my interests (favourite books, films, quotes) and limited information about my employment and education. Participants could not view my 'wall' (which my other Friends could post to), nor could they view images or posts my other Friends had 'tagged' me in. This mechanism of audience segregation was achieved by adding participants to a restricted 'Friend list', a standard Facebook function, to which I assigned specific permissions.

Reinscribing this distance in the professional research relationship may have come at the cost of an ongoing two-way 'sense of interaction, participation and involvement' (Rumens 2008: 16-17) between researcher and participant. At the time the project was designed, this cost was not seriously considered, as it existed somewhere in a murky territory from which so many (if not all) questions of ethics emerge, becoming clear (and important) only upon reflection after the fieldwork.

While beyond the immediate scope of the sets of arguments presented here, the ethical considerations raised throughout this chapter also highlight this potential for a sustained 'friendship' between researcher and participant through social media, destabilising traditional notions of distance and potentially bringing the participants into later, 'post-fieldwork' stages of the research and beyond. Facebook's architecture makes it difficult to realise this more equal research partnership without fully opening-up the researcher's own personal life as mediated on Facebook to inspection by the participant. While I was unable to realise this potential, future researchers would be encouraged to consider these possibilities in more detail as the social conventions and technical limitations of these spaces evolve.

Chapter Conclusion

While there are clear challenges to conducting research in online social spaces in an ethically reflexive way, these challenges should not discourage researchers. If this research is to be conducted in an ethical manner, it will need to be informed by a growing tradition of scholarship in this area. Buchanan (2011: 103), for example, suggests that the 'top-down, regulatory' design of institutional level ethical clearance processes must change to learn from

guidelines emerging from research organisations and scholarly communities involved directly in the research itself, such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which published guidelines for the ethical conduct of internet research in consultation with the group's membership (AoIR & Ess 2002), and at the time of writing is in the process of updating those guidelines. Further, as Hine (2000) suggests in calling for a reflexive approach to internet studies, it's also crucial that researchers investigating online social interactions take it upon themselves to learn how to use and 'be' in the sites they are studying. As I have discussed in this chapter, even as an 'insider' myself, I was also forced to develop my own literacies and understandings of the technical architectures of MySpace and Facebook in order to reflect critically on my own practice.

Lewis et al. (2008: 341), the researchers from the problematic 'T3' study discussed in the second section of this chapter, argue that social network sites can provide researchers with a wealth of sociologically fascinating information from which to draw, potentially 'ushering in a new way of doing social science' (Zimmer 2010: 323). While generally I agree with this lofty claim, these sites should not simply be treated as information repositories. For some users, the exchanges that occur on social network sites can be deeply intimate and personal; the 'data' that make these sites so valuable for researchers are also expressions of and mechanisms that facilitate the individual's everyday life. For the young users of these sites, who attract the greatest portion of both academic and popular attention, these sites can also act as archives of transitional moments and serve as important tools in maintaining contact with friends, family and all manner of acquaintances. For this reason, it is crucial that

the ethical considerations I have outlined in this chapter remain at the fore of the research exercise.

The implications above are at the core of the four chapters that follow. It has been my intention in the empirical sections of this thesis to document the emergence of identity performance practices, norms and conventions around friending, and to continue to frame these sites as manifestations of the reflexive project of self.

Chapter 4: Integrity and Authenticity

I try to make [my MySpace profile] kind of vague in some ways, not to get people to ask me things but because I don't want to just put it all out there? I don't want to show my cards in a way. I feel a lot of people do that on MySpace. I'm more aloof.

(Shannon, 23)

Shannon is a 23-year-old white university student who also works as a concierge. He is bisexual, has a girlfriend, and goes to raves. He prefers MySpace, but at the time of the interview he had also started using Facebook reluctantly as many of his friends had made this move already. He explained that his preference for MySpace was born out of an appreciation for the way he could remain 'vague' about himself on the site. Facebook, on the other hand, required too much of him. Shannon explained that he had different 'tiers' or circles of Friends on social network sites, reflecting his everyday social life, and he shared different things with different circles. The 'vague', 'aloof' narrative of self that Shannon made visible on MySpace was planned and well thought-out. He valued the separation he had fostered between his 'social worlds', and didn't like that sites such as Facebook wanted to force those worlds together. Shannon situated his particular approach to performing a sense of self (part of a multiplicity of selves) on MySpace in relation to other practices that he disliked, such as those who 'put it all out there' and revealed too much about themselves online.

Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO and co-founder of Facebook, has a very clear philosophy on identity and integrity for an era in which more than 955 million people (Facebook.com 2012) are using his service, a philosophy that is at odds with young people's own practices like the ones described by Shannon.

"You have one identity," [Zuckerberg] says emphatically three times in a single minute during a 2009 interview ... "The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly," he says ... "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a *lack of integrity*," ... "the level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person".

(Kirkpatrick 2010: 198, italics added)

Zuckerberg may not be a theorist of identity, but he has developed and continues to run, and exert a great level of control¹³ over a powerful platform that is used in the everyday lives of many people. Zuckerberg's comments highlight a need to address what integrity is and what it means to *lack* integrity in the context of social network sites. According to Steele (1988: 262), a sense of self-integrity is concerned with being 'morally adequate... competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes'. Stemming from the Latin *integritās*, meaning wholeness, entireness, completeness, and purity (Oxford English Dictionary 2012), it would appear that, in Zuckerberg's terms, only a singular model of identity can be a 'wholesome' one. This constitutes a discursive attack on a 'multiplicity approach' to identities that should not be downplayed. As I have indicated earlier, this thesis is not so much concerned about Facebook or MySpace as entities or institutions themselves, but rather about the way these sites are used by young people who are constructing and making visible reflexive identity-projects in online social spaces. However, the reason I draw 'Zuckerberg's philosophy' on identity into this discussion, is to consider the ways in which this philosophy may have some impact on the users themselves.

¹³ I refer here to Zuckerberg's majority control over Facebook, with '56.9 percent of voting power' and 'the largest single stake in the company' at 28.4 percent (MacMillan 2012).

In this chapter, I continue to give a voice to my participants, especially in relation to notions of integrity and authenticity. In this way, this chapter and the next serve to resist discourses that would frame young people – or any people, in response to Zuckerberg’s philosophy above – as somehow lacking a sense of integrity for seeking to replicate the conventions of audience segregation and impression management that we are familiar with offline, in online social spaces. Beyond merely resisting Zuckerberg’s ‘you have one identity’ viewpoint, which would be too easy given the frameworks developed in Chapter 2, I am centrally concerned here with questions of trust, coherence and authenticity which I would argue are implicit in Zuckerberg’s integrity discourse if we look to unpack usage of the term integrity. I am also concerned here with giving a voice to the young participants in this study, like Shannon, who push back against discourses that would frame their practices of audience segregation and multiplicity in identity-work as representing a lack of integrity. The kinds of conventions that young people like Shannon work to nurture, even if contained to their own practice, are powerful and valuable, shaping the processes by which interaction in online social spaces takes place.

In the first part of this chapter, I attend to Zuckerberg’s philosophy in more detail, specifically addressing the assumptions inherent in this approach about transparency and privacy, followed by a related but usefully separate critique of the singular model of identity advanced by Zuckerberg in relation to the frameworks developed earlier in this thesis. In the second part of the chapter, I continue to draw my empirical work, demonstrating the strategies of identity performance and impression management with which my participants engaged. I do so by deconstructing the elements that constitute MySpace and Facebook, framing these elements as ‘identity devices’. It is my argument here that

encoding (performing identity) and decoding (reading identity performance) is dependent on a variety of contextual knowledges or literacies, similar to but more nuanced than Thornton's (1996) concept of subcultural capital, which I will explore below. Instead, I advance the concept of 'close friend capital' to develop my argument around integrity and authenticity.

Throughout this chapter, I return to my argument that the various strategies of and approaches to identity performance and impression management this thesis makes visible act as examples that demonstrate a very clear sense of what I would argue is integrity. In departing from Zuckerberg's deployment of the term, I stress the competent, coherent, and stable nature of these identity performance strategies, borrowing, if selectively, from Steele's (1988) definition of self-integrity.

To Lack Integrity

Privacy

Beneath the broader concerns I have identified above, there are two specific problematic dimensions to Zuckerberg's claim about identity. The first is the over-arching assumption about transparency and privacy. As is the case in Zuckerberg's account, assertions about the rise of what has been referred to as the 'information age' (Castells 1996) or more recently (and perhaps hyperbolically) the 'age of Facebook' (Raynes-Goldie 2010) are often conflated with arguments about a broad decline of privacy. Tufekci (2008b: 249), for instance, suggests that most of the college age participants in her study 'freely add most people who ask to be friended'. Similarly, Gross and Acquisti (2005: 78) suggest that the college age participants in their study were 'quite oblivious' and 'unconcerned' about their privacy, who provided personal data 'generously'

and used privacy preferences only 'sparingly'. They go on to suggest that this approach to privacy rendered their participants 'at risk' of 'attacks on their physical and online persona'. These academic discourses are regularly reproduced (and often compounded) through the popular media, foregrounding the negative aspects of these spaces, including cyber-bullying (Moses 2008), youth predation (Perrie 2010), poor behaviour (McDougall 2010) and even neurological damage (Derbyshire 2009).

Although my research was undertaken only a few years after that of Gross and Acquisti (2005) and Tufekci (2008b), I have found a clear difference, not only in concern for privacy, but also in strategies for maintaining control of online social spaces and the information that flows in these spaces. Many of the young people in my study, from a variety of backgrounds and levels of education, are highly strategic in managing their information and online privacy. All thirty-three participants described varying approaches to managing a sense of control over their presence on social network sites, even if that was a very 'loose' sense of control. At one end of the spectrum, for example, David (23) would accept add requests from almost anyone on Facebook (except 'dickheads') and Simon (15) explained that he would sometimes add people he didn't know on MySpace (a two-way action allowing him to see other user's profiles if set to private, and for the user he is adding to also see his profile), but then delete them if they weren't the kind of person with whom he would want to be friends. At the other end of the spectrum, Jamie (27) would only add people on Facebook who she 'knew', and described herself as 'vigilant' when it came to maintaining her privacy on Facebook. In a variation of this, Charlotte (19) revised her friending strategies several months prior to becoming involved in the research, retrospectively 'culling' her list of Friends on Facebook from

approximately 450 to just 118, which she thought better reflected a network of people she knew and liked. Eric's (20) approach sat somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, representative of other participants' approaches, as he explained that while the majority of his Facebook Friends were people he had met in-person, there were a handful (five for Eric, but ranging from 'a couple' to 'a dozen or so' for others) of people who he hadn't met in-person before. These 'Facebook only Friends' were, for Eric, friends-of-friends who he envisaged he would meet in-person one day. Importantly, however, the more 'open' and 'loose' approach to managing privacy online exemplified by David (23) and Simon (15) appeared to be uncommon.

Consistent with that observation, Green, Brady, Olafsson, Harley and Lumby (2011) found that 83 per cent of the 400 Australian 9 to 16-year-olds they surveyed had set their profiles on social network sites to private, and 92 per cent engaged online primarily with people they already knew face to face. While this is a fairly imprecise measure of the extent to which young people are concerned with managing a sense of privacy online, these findings do indicate a broad impression of concern that is often silenced in discourses of *openness* ('everything you put on the internet is public') and *disregard* ('young people put their whole lives online for everyone to see with no sense of consequences'). While Zuckerberg's insistence on openness and transparency only fuels these discourses, as I will continue to demonstrate, these sentiments are at odds with the actual practices of many young people for whom engaging with social network sites is part of the everyday.

Audience Segregation

I will further develop this line of evidence in Chapter 5 when discussing the spectrum of strategies by which my participants exert a sense of control over their online social spaces through friending practices. The point I want to make here, however, is that the young people in this study *are* concerned about transparency and control. Not only are there a wide variety of 'privacy practices' in operation, but it is clear that these practices are dynamic and evolving, evidenced by Charlotte (19) who revised her friending practices after several years of using Facebook and 'culled' her list of Friends. These dynamic and evolving changes to privacy strategies involve not only discretion in the sharing of information but also nuanced understandings of who constitutes their audience. Such 'understandings' are tenuously framed, informed by emerging social conventions for digitally mediated spaces. As I have explained previously, social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook collapse the entire array of social relationships into one category: Friend. This creates an awkward social space for users, and this tension has given rise to an online version of what Goffman referred to as '*audience segregation... a device for protecting fostered impressions*' (italics added, 1959: 57). The way strategies of online audience segregation manifest and are played-out, however, are varied and still very much contested.

Users can achieve segregation through various strategies. On Facebook, for example, Friends can be assigned to 'lists', allowing peers to be separated from family and casual acquaintances discerned from close friends. This strategy then allows varying levels of content control to be exercised, such that, for instance, one's work colleagues (or parent, as is often the case) can access only certain parts of a profile whereas close friends may be able to access the entire profile. Other methods of audience segregation include having multiple

profiles on a single site (which Facebook's terms of service prohibit, given Zuckerberg's insistence that identity is singular) or by maintaining profiles on multiple sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Academia.edu, YouTube and so on, with each site serving as a performative platform for separate audiences. Different sites also carry with them clear differences in practice. As Huberman, Romero and Wu (2009) explain, on Twitter, 'following' another user does not always predilect two-way interaction. It is possible to follow, but not be followed in turn, whereas most profile based social network sites (certainly MySpace and Facebook) require the articulation to be two-way; you cannot be friended without in turn 'being a Friend'. The terminologies of these interactions are themselves problematic, and I will return to this issue in Chapter 5.

Even between similar sites such as MySpace and Facebook, the key sites for this thesis, there are differences in expected practice. While MySpace is more popular amongst younger users who primarily seek to engage exclusively with their peer group¹⁴, Facebook appears to have a much broader appeal and thus users frequently engage with a broader audience. To negotiate their identity performances accordingly, the individual often employs the aforementioned strategies of audience segregation. Thus, while the technical architecture of Facebook (driven by Zuckerberg's philosophy of identity) attempts to collapse these relationships into a single space, users such as Shannon (23) with whom this chapter began, reverse that conflation through strategies of audience segregation and careful impression management. I would argue that this reinvention or reworking of impression management in online social spaces

¹⁴ See Chapter 6 for a development of comparisons between MySpace and Facebook.

actually demonstrates a user-driven 'clawing back' of privacy from the trend towards transparency advanced by Zuckerberg.

Singular Identity

The second problematic dimension arising from Zuckerberg's philosophy of identity, which clearly overlaps with the unpacking of transparency above but is nonetheless worth separating, is the singular model of identity which Zuckerberg advances. In many ways, his claim that multiplicity implies a lack of integrity is reminiscent of early moral panics around online identity, best articulated by Turkle (1995) through the work of Rheingold (1994) and Gergen (1991), flagged in earlier chapters: 'Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility', Turkle (1995: 257) warns. While along with Rheingold and Gergen, Turkle goes on to offer a highly optimistic narrative about identity on the internet from their positions in the early 1990s, the threat of multiplicity (the risk of losing a sense of identity cohesion) clearly persists in current and very powerful discourses about how individuals engage with the construction and formation of identity in online social spaces. To return to the example of Shannon, however, it is clear that translated practices of audience segregation and impression management can produce narratives of self, articulated online, that are at once multiple and coherent. What kind of story did Shannon's MySpace profile 'tell'? I asked Shannon to imagine that someone (named Sally for the purposes of the interviews) had accessed his MySpace profile, despite his privacy settings:

Int.: ...what do you think she'd say? About you?

Shannon: I don't know. She might say, because one thing I have in my about me section on MySpace which is I think the only thing slightly irreverent which is that I just don't really care about the whole thing and I really identify with grunge music in that same sort of way. Like there's an apathy. Not an apathy where I just don't

care, but just like you know... So I think maybe she'd see that because I also have a clip from *Smashing Pumpkins* playing a live show where they just don't really care and it's just... Umm, my photos - she'd probably say I've done some travelling. Maybe active. Maybe kind of has some friends. I don't know! [laughs and smiles] I don't really know. I don't know what someone would think of me. Because I'm so... I can't be impartial. Because the way I look at it, the way I look at my profile I'd see me like that, but that's just... You know... how I see me.

Int.: Okay, well I'll rephrase the question slightly. If Sally was a writer and she was going to write a story about you and all she had to go on was your profile, what would the story be about?

Shannon: Um... She'd look at my interests and it'd be about urban exploration in an abandoned warehouse which ends up becoming my home which is made into a loft which I hold raves at.

Int.: What would the title be?

Shannon: [long pause] All things. Transient.

The narrative that Shannon articulates, based on a reflection on his MySpace profile, is complex and loaded. While at first he is unsure what a third-party might think of him, based only on his profile, once he is given the opportunity to transpose the themes and elements of his profile in to a fictional story, those themes become clearer. Invoking 'urban exploration', for instance, connects Shannon to what Pinder (2005: 385) describes as 'a means of engaging with, and intervening in, cities [... where participants] may challenge norms about how urban space is framed and represented, and where they may help to open up other possibilities'. Thus, while Shannon describes himself as apathetic or care-free in certain situations, he is also deeply committed and engaged in other situations. Although not discussed directly in our interview, Shannon's Facebook profile is dominated by links to stories on political matters. These contradictions and multiplicities are coherently threaded together for Shannon, but he also acknowledges that this story of self is always changing. When I asked Shannon to imagine how he might reflect back on his MySpace profile in

ten years (through a 'time capsule' scenario), Shannon explained that his profile is just one 'interpretation' of him in a particular time and place: 2009 on the Gold Coast.

Int.: And how do you think you'd feel about that interpretation later on?

Shannon: The same way I feel about looking at writing from maybe three years ago that I've done. Or four years ago or whatever. Um, I'd understand it because I think I'd remember when all that was happening, when that was me... and maybe like themes like character themes – I don't know how better to put that – might still be applicable to me? But I think overall that same profile wouldn't represent me in ten years... I think my lifestyle will just be so different and even though things still might interest me, uh, new things will interest me and new priorities will come into my life, and new goals, and it just won't all still be relevant.

In summary, the reflexive project of self that Shannon makes visible on MySpace and Facebook is complicated, sometimes contradictory, certainly multiple and, for Shannon, inevitably dynamic. Shannon recognises these characteristics of his identity-project, and performs a sense of self online that works to remain true to those characteristics. This should not imply a lack of integrity, but should, rather, represent an attempt to articulate a coherent, authentic sense of self by drawing on the social conventions into which Shannon has been socialised.

As the young people in my study demonstrate through their often complex audience segregation strategies, which I will explore more fully in the next chapter, negotiating the identity of friend, son or daughter, co-worker, lover and perhaps future employee (amongst other combinations) in a single performative space is a difficult proposition. These are performances usually mediated by physical space and long-standing social conventions. Online, in an imagined space where the performance of identity is articulated, managed and

subsequently archived, can these multiple performative positions co-exist in an authentic and coherent form whilst maintaining a sense of integrity? Is it possible to conduct oneself in a manner that is both authentic to close friends, and appropriate for professional colleagues? There is a tension here between integrity and authenticity. It is a tension that all users of any social network site must negotiate at some point. As the negative representations of social network sites in popular discourse remind us (often focussed particularly on young people), some individuals appear to do so more successfully than others. In the following section, I continue with these threads on identity performance and impression management, returning specifically to the four key elements (or the devices of identity) of profile-based social network sites: the display picture, the about me content, the friends list, and the 'wall'.

Devices of Identity and Impression Management

The boys at work give me a lot of stick. We're all best mates as well as on Facebook... I remember I was having a conversation with a girl [on Facebook], and y'know, she was dropping the "I love you" and stuff like that, so my boss proceeded to print out my comments page and y'know, do like a little role-play re-enactment when I walked in [to work] the next day. So um, it was quite embarrassing, but y'know... you just have to laugh... I suppose when it's happening you don't really think that everyone can read what you're saying.

(Brad, 20)

Brad is a 20 year-old white tradesperson, living on the Gold Coast. Brad had lost his driver's licence for driving under the influence of alcohol not long before our interview took place, and given that the Gold Coast is de-centred and geographically diffuse (Ditton 2010: 167), public transport here is notoriously difficult to use. Thus, Brad explained that he felt fairly isolated at the time of the interview, but that Facebook allowed him to maintain his friendships and even helped him to co-ordinate lifts from his friends to parties and social gatherings.

The embarrassing scenario described by Brad above is a particularly useful example of how interactions on social network sites trouble conceptualisations of space, in terms of 'public-ness' and 'private-ness', and also in terms of how this troubling relates to strategies of impression management. Brad describes how easy it was to sometimes 'forget' about his actual (compared to his imagined) audience on Facebook, and how slippages like this one work to shape his strategies of impression management. Later in the interview, Brad explained that after this incident he was particularly cautious when it came to personal conversations on Facebook, ensuring they took place through a one-on-one IM conversation or via an inbox thread, visible only to the participants in the conversation rather than the broader network of Friends. This audience segregation failure also made Brad consider what was appropriate for the quasi-public space of 'the wall', for which there was a controlled audience (Friends only), but where, up until this incident, there was no regular *imagining* of that audience. In other words, Brad previously didn't consider exactly who had access to his profile – and the wall specifically – each time he posted to that wall or read a message posted there by one of his Friends. Embarrassing incidents like this one – embarrassing precisely because there was a failure in impression management – worked to shape Brad's future strategies for impression management, and made him rethink his usage of the 'devices' of identity available to him on Facebook.

As detailed in Chapter 3, profiles on social network sites are made up of four key elements: the profile picture, an image which represents the user throughout the site; the about me section, usually containing an autobiographical paragraph describing the user along with lists of interests, hobbies, favourite music, films, books, and so on; a list of friends that

constitutes the networked nature of a social network site; and a wall or a comments section, where other users can write a public message on their Friend's profile. These elements can also be understood as devices that enable the performance of identity to take place on social network sites, akin to the props Goffman describes as 'sign-equipment' (1959: 45) such as clothes. Images, descriptions, and associations with cultural products work to create a narrative around the profile author. Taken together, these elements or devices of identity – online sign-equipment – make up the profile, which serves as a dynamic narrative of self that is under constant revision.

Encoding and Decoding Identity Performance

In discussing Friendster, an early social network site that became prominent in 2003, boyd argues that identity performance on the site required an 'active interpretation of social contexts' (2007: 141). In other words, as with physical encounters, identity performance online is a two-step process. First, the profile author must encode or deploy a sense of self through the construction of a profile, initially by nominating a profile picture and providing the about me information. On MySpace and Facebook, this entails a profile picture, and the about me description connected to lists of hobbies, favourite music, television shows, books and so on.

The second step in this process is where the audience, visiting the profile, must decode the performative cues. As boyd (2008a) points out, these cues will have a greater sense of currency depending on the individual doing the decoding. Thornton (1996) proposes 'subcultural capital', a variation of Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, as a form of knowledge with particular purchase in a subcultural group. For instance, in the subcultures that

Thornton was investigating, subcultural capital was 'objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections' (1996: 11).

While I would argue that the use of subculture as a theoretical framework for describing the systems of belonging that young people participate in is problematic, as I will explore in Chapter 7, Thornton's notion of subcultural capital does offer a useful way of thinking about knowledges that are of value in different contexts. Or, at the very least, it opens the notion of cultural capital out to a more nuanced set of implications that do not reinscribe a neat hierarchy in culture: different people will value different forms of cultural capital in different ways. While a knowledge of and regular attendance at the ballet and the opera that Bourdieu (1984) describes as 'high culture' may be valuable in certain social circles or systems of belonging (as I will come to refer to socio-cultural groupings of people in Chapter 7), in others, an intimate knowledge of the *Harry Potter* franchise or owning every *Something for Kate*¹⁵ CD may constitute a valuable form of capital. In this sense, then, the process of encoding and decoding a performance of identity on a profile-based social network site is reliant on these nuanced forms of knowledge, partially explained by Thornton's (1996) notion of subcultural capital.

What boyd (2007: 141) describes as 'an active interpretation of social contexts' on social network sites can be likened to what Goffman (1959) refers to as an awareness of rules associated with particular regions (or social spaces). In both cases, the individual is required to undertake some conceptualisation of audience. In the physical spaces of Goffman's examples (the church, the shop floor, the hospital ward), being aware of the audience to a performance of self may be more apparent. In online social spaces, however,

¹⁵ A rock band from Melbourne, Australia.

one must *actively* work to imagine that audience to determine the appropriate conventions of impression management. As Brad's example above demonstrates, this takes some getting used to, and a failure in impression management (due to a lack of conceptualising the actual audience of a performance) can lead to a re-thinking of impression management strategies. Beyond knowing what kind of story to tell, and how to 'read' stories in these spaces, then, the technical how-to process also requires a specific set of skills and knowledges.

The ability to customise and personalise MySpace profiles was enabled by an originally unintentional flaw in coding that allowed users to apply their own backgrounds, colour schemes and effects through the use of rudimentary HTML (Hyper-Text Markup Language), often generated through third-party websites. Simon (15), for instance, regularly 'pimped-out' his MySpace profile with different kinds of graphics and effects, setting his profile apart from others. When reflecting back on their 'MySpace days', older participants referred to MySpace as 'juvenile' (Charlotte, 19) or 'childish' (Melissa, 20) because of the abundance of messy graphics and disorganised profiles. Instead, the 'clean' uniformity of Facebook, where users could not customise design, layout or colour scheme, appeared to be more appealing, especially for the participants in their late teens and older. The control and customisation options that made MySpace so attractive only a few years prior, seemed to go rapidly out of fashion in 2008:

Charlotte: I don't know, I always saw MySpace as being a more juvenile version of Facebook, because everyone on MySpace had crazy layouts. I can't read that without... hurting someone. I think it's like MySpace was more of a 'post your photos', 'talk in certain'... *there was a certain way you could talk on MySpace that when people tried to shift it on to Facebook they looked like idiots.* I don't know why exactly, but they just did. So... in a lot of about me

sections, if people wrote the same shit they had on MySpace, like you know: 'likes tea' (in a condescending, high voice) and then has this whole list... It's like, you sound like an old woman.

Int.: So there were different ways of constructing profiles on the two sites?

Charlotte: Yeah. I think so.

The clear distinction that Charlotte points towards here between identity performance conventions between MySpace and Facebook is a useful example of how nuanced these practices are. While established conventions may be appropriate in one space – MySpace, in this instance – they are not readily transferred to other spaces, like Facebook. A second example from Goffman might be framed to run in parallel, to help me highlight some important similarities and differences between the policing of performance conventions in online and in physical spaces:

While in church, a woman may be permitted to sit, daydream, and even doze. However, as a saleswoman on the floor of a dress shop, she may be required to stand, keep alert, refrain from chewing gum, keep a fixed smile on her face even when not talking to anyone, and wear clothes she can ill afford.

(Goffman 1959: 112)

Beyond the gender discourses at work here, both of these examples involve a similar kind of discrimination in conventions required to perform a context- or region-appropriate version of self. The important difference between these examples, however, is around the explicit and the implicit operation and policing of conventions. The performance of the saleswoman from Goffman's example is policed (or not policed) directly by other actors: by sympathetic, knowing looks from fellow church-goers, by a reprimand from a manager, and by disapproving glances from customers on the floor of the dress shop. On social network sites, a glance or a look is imperceptible. The informal policing of conventions occurs

in the more difficult-to-decode sub-text of comments, or when conversations about social network sites occur in-person, through a verbal exchange about whether or not 'liking tea' on Facebook is appropriate.

There is also an important distinction here between the extent to which certain conventions are established or still developing. Appropriate conduct in a workplace is usually clearly articulated, whereas conventions around what is suitable for an about me section on MySpace compared to Facebook are uncertain or at least informal. What Charlotte perceives to be the conduct of 'an old woman' (and thus presumably unsuitable for a young person) may, for others, be endearing or entirely suitable. The point is, the conventions that govern appropriate identity performances in online social spaces are highly contingent on a personal set of preferences.

What constitutes 'appropriate' here is clearly open to critique, and as I will demonstrate in the following sections, each of the participants in this study have varying practices for undertaking identity-work in these spaces. While there are common conventions and themes at work in these practices, there are also considerable differences, as the example offered above by Charlotte (19) demonstrates.

The Profile Picture and 'Close Friend Capital'

Perhaps the most important element of identity performance on both MySpace and Facebook is the profile picture or display picture which acts as a title image for the profile and as an icon for the user throughout the site. Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011: 251) argue that photographs on Facebook serve as a means of 'introducing the self and performing one's identity', and Siibak (2010) identifies profile pictures as 'tools' of impression management on social network

sites. The profile picture in particular, then, serves as an icon or a representation of the profile, much in the same way that a person's name comes to represent that individual. The profile picture associated with a Facebook account also circulates beyond Facebook on other sites. In September 2011, services outside Facebook began requiring their users to have a Facebook account in order to sign in, describing Facebook as a kind of 'passport' to the internet (Baym 2011). Critically, 'Facebook-as-passport' renders the profile, and specifically the profile picture itself, as a representation of the individual not just on Facebook but also elsewhere on the internet. Thus, the profile picture plays an even greater role as the first device in the impression management profile, akin to a 'first appearance' in a physical encounter.

Discussing the use of social network sites in hiring decisions, Brown and Vaughn (2011: 223) point out that a single profile picture can potentially reveal a great deal of information about the user, including race and ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, age, sexual orientation (where intimacy between partners is depicted¹⁶), physical attractiveness, smoking and drinking habits, and so on. Sessions (2009) describes the profile picture as 'the best indication of a user's corporeal, off-line appearance', reinforcing Boler's (2007: 140) assertion referred to earlier in this thesis that despite the liberating hype of the internet, users continue to be anchored by 'reductive bodily markers that re-invoke stereotypical notions of racialized, sexualized and gendered bodies'. Sessions (2009) also describes the tension between deception and authenticity in the style of profile pictures, discussing the phenomenon of 'MySpace Angles' where the subject takes a self-portrait with 'arm outstretched above eye level...

¹⁶ Although, there is also a phenomenon described by McCormack (2012) as 'ironic recuperation' of hetero-masculinity, wherein straight men 'act gay' to ironically recuperate their masculinity. Thus, straight men posing intimately with other straight men for Facebook photos troubles this potential for reading sexuality in profile pictures.

[making] the user appear especially attractive due to perspective and scope obtained from holding the camera above one's head'. Sessions concludes that, just as King Henry VIII was disappointed upon meeting his fourth wife based on her portrait, users of social network sites have learnt to become sceptical about the presentation of self in these spaces: 'you looked better on MySpace' (from the title of Sessions' paper).

Eric (20) had a very specific approach to managing his profile pictures, alternating between two:

Eric: It gets boring I suppose with one. And they're quite different photos. On one I'm looking a bit more smart, and the other one is a bit more... wild night out kind of thing, so I like to switch between them.

Int.: Do they reflect different sides of you?

Eric: Yeah. I think so. They're with two different sets of friends. One group of friends I go out with to like Field Day and festivals and stuff and the other group is more of a 'stay-in' kind of one.

Int.: Why do you change the profile pictures?

Eric: I think it's mood. I think when I go and see it I go "Oh, it's a bit trashy" and then the other one I go "Oh that's a bit stuck up" and then I go back to the trashy one. Yeah.

Eric's practice of alternating between two profile pictures is a good example of the constraints of a medium where various audiences are collapsed into a singular performative context. Eric's profile pictures invoke the spectre of Goffman's masks (1959: 65), awkwardly and insufficiently demonstrating a duality (and presumably a hint towards an even greater multiplicity) in the impression Eric is trying to 'give off'. Importantly, Eric is attempting to be *accurate*, to perform a sense of self that aligns with the concept of self he has for himself, and that he believes his friends (even different groups of friends) have for him.

Lynne (24) reported changing her display picture much more frequently, even multiple times each day: 'I changed it when I felt the need that people needed to know I felt differently ... or if I was in a different mood ... otherwise it just reflected something that wasn't me anymore.' Lynne justifies this constant revision of her profile performance as a dedication to authenticity, but also described the great lengths she would go to in order to properly managing her impression on MySpace and later on Facebook. Lynne explains that she regularly un-tags photos that her friends tag her in, as she is very conscious of how she looks. Her close friends have come to know which photos she'll be happy with, and which photos she will likely hate.

Lynne's practice here demonstrates that the deception/authenticity tension is much more nuanced than Sessions (2009) accounts for. While some users might think that self-portraits taken from particular angles are deceptive, the argument could be made that any form of grooming is an exercise in deception. Goffman's (1959: 42) notion of the idealised self, for instance, relies on what might be described as the invisibility of effort in reaching that idealised representation. He describes the radio host who, to conduct what appears to be an informal conversation, may in fact have spent many hours carefully testing a script. The painstaking nature of Lynne's impression management on MySpace and Facebook doesn't necessarily have to be framed as narcissistic or deceptive, as in the discourses Sessions (2009) was engaging, but rather as an exercise in carefully managing and fostering an impression.

At the centre of both Lynne's and Eric's profile-picture-selecting practices appears to be a fundamental need to be 'properly understood', and the tension between being understood and misunderstood (properly represented and misrepresented) is reliant on a feeling of success or failure in impression

management. The profiles of social network sites make successful impression management (from the perspective of the profile author) difficult, because of the way these sites collapse audiences into a singular performative context.

As part of a large quantitative Pew Internet survey, Madden and Smith (2010) discovered that young people are increasingly conscious of the impressions their profiles are giving off, and the reputations associated with these impressions. As such, they are also actively committed to monitoring and revising their online identity performances or 'managing their reputations' through a process of curation that I will revisit to below. Again, to return to Goffman's terminology, these young people are deploying idealised selves. All participants admit to usually choosing more flattering or attractive images as their profile pictures, although many also echoed Eric's concern that using only the best images (where dressed in formal clothing, for example) may also give the wrong impression ('stuck up' or 'wanky' in Eric's terms). Instead, an idealised authenticity emerged as the central aim in the practice of display picture selection.

While Eric only alternated between two images (on both MySpace and Facebook) the underlying implications of his actions are not dissimilar to Lynne's. What they share is a desire to present an accurate version of themselves, even down to their current mood. It is important to note here that the tension between the images Eric oscillates between also represents the uncomfortable tension in performing a sense of self that is multiple: Eric has groups of friends he likes to go out with and get 'trashy' with, and other groups of friends he prefers to 'stay-in' with. Both MySpace and Facebook, however, act as performative spaces that collapse these social contexts and call for a flattening of the individual's conceptualisation of audience.

This flattening represents a limitation (or, from Zuckerberg's perspective, perhaps a 'feature') in the design of profile-based social network sites. It is a limitation that all users must negotiate in creating a profile. For those producers who do not adhere to Zuckerberg's open and transparent 'single identity' architecture, there are various strategies for dealing with this limitation: carefully curated 'lists of Friends' with associated access permissions, strict friending practices (discussed in Chapter 5), maintaining (against the site's terms and conditions) multiple profiles, and so on. While Eric's practices might not represent the same kind of tension described by Shannon (23) in the opening section of this chapter, both of these accounts represent powerful counterpoints to Zuckerberg's 'philosophy' on identity.

Julie (22) described a profile-picture-selecting practice that relied on a specific form of 'in-group' humour, a version of the nuanced cultural capital discussed earlier:

Int.: What sort of photos do you use mainly as your profile pictures?

Julie: Ones that make me laugh or remind me of something that was really funny, something that was really fun that I did with my friends. Yeah... *I don't like just pictures of myself. I would prefer to have something that reminded me of a really funny day or something.*

Int.: So what do you think someone that doesn't know you would think about those images?

Julie: I think the one I have at the moment people would think I'm nuts 'cuz I'm wearing a stupid pink bag thing over my head... I think, um... they might question my sanity. But at the end of the day I don't really care. The people that know me would know that it would be a funny random thing not that it's how I am all the time I think.

Julie's impression management strategy of choosing images that demonstrate her humour rather than focussing on her looks works to foster a particular idealised version of self, just not the kind anticipated in the

authenticity/deception discourse investigated by Sessions (2009). Instead, Julie's strategy implies that something untold is going on outside the frame of the photograph, to which only certain members of her audience-network are privileged. Others must guess about the context and the punch-line.

Whereas Thornton's (1996) model of subcultural capital describes a set of knowledges shared amongst members of particular scenes about what is 'hip' or 'in', the resonance of the 'in-joke' in Julie's account represents a similar but further nuanced form of capital, perhaps best described as a 'close friend capital'. This form of capital works to reinforce a sense of belonging between close friends, which can subsequently be demonstrated through comments on what otherwise may seem 'crazy' profile pictures, but it also works to exclude others without this highly localised and subjective form of capital, reminiscent of Tajfel's (1970) ingroups and outgroups.

Close friend capital may also work as a response to the collapse of social contexts. When potentially hundreds of 'Friends' are connected to a MySpace or Facebook profile, the intimacy of close friendships may be compromised. Julie's attempts to invoke in-jokes or private jokes with her close friends on Facebook reassert that sense of intimacy. Jokes or references to physical events ('a really funny day or something') may be visible and read by her 400-odd Friends, but may only resonate with a handful of these people, inscribing an ingroup (those that 'get' the reference) and an outgroup (those that don't). I will return to this thread in Chapter 5 when I discuss Friendship hierarchies.

The three accounts of profile-picture-choosing practices described in this section are varied and nuanced in different ways. Eric's (20) practice of oscillating between just two images (one 'trashy' and one 'stuck up') is a good

example of the tension between multiplicity and the constraints of the profile acting as a singular performative medium, reminiscent of a similar kind of tension described by Shannon (23) at the beginning of this chapter. The duality in the images Eric oscillates between also hints at a deeper sense of multiplicity, realised more fully in Lynne's (24) hyper-frequent updating of her profile picture. She described this practice through a language of presenting the most *accurate* and *authentic* self ('[it] wasn't me anymore'), while also being complicated by the fastidious untagging of photos posted by Friends that didn't present her in the way she wanted to be presented. Finally, Julie's (22) more nuanced, humour-focussed impression management strategy for selecting a profile picture demonstrates her making use of an ingroup set of knowledges that can be described as close friend capital.

The 'About Me' Section

Participants had varying approaches to the about me section on their profiles. Between MySpace and Facebook, there is some difference between about me sections, both in technical terms and in social conventions around the content of these sections. First, the technical architecture of each site invites the profile author to provide different information. On MySpace, during the period of the study, this remained fairly constant. Users were prompted to provide information including their sex, age and location, 'interests' (general, music, films, heroes), 'details' (relationship status, sexual orientation, hometown, body type, ethnicity, religion, zodiac sign and so on), and education background. On Facebook, users were generally prompted to provide similar information, although the way it was displayed sometimes changed. For instance, rather than having a field for sexual orientation, Facebook would ask the user to select whether they were 'interested in' men or women. The relationship status field could also be linked

to a partner's profile: X is in a relationship with/married to Y. While the way the about me section on Facebook is displayed (and which information is foregrounded) has changed since the fieldwork was conducted¹⁷, the information itself has remained relatively consistent.

Second, beyond the technical design of these sites (what information the profile construction process prompts users to provide), I am more concerned with the various social conventions that have emerged around appropriate and indeed 'authentic' performances of identity. To return to Charlotte's (19) observation from earlier in this chapter, for instance, there are clear differences between MySpace and Facebook not only in terms of what personal information the sites invite users to provide, but also what users expect other users to provide, and *how* those stories are articulated. When Charlotte suggests that listing 'tea' as an interest is okay on MySpace but not okay on Facebook, she is suggesting here that the expectations that frame what is appropriate about me information on MySpace (lists of interests, for example) are different on Facebook. In other words, the performative conventions that framed the practice of autobiographical self-description on social networks changed with Facebook, the second and now dominant site.

A clear theme around resisting the value of the about me section also emerged in the fieldwork. Consider Melissa, a 20 year-old international student, studying Communications. At the time of the research, Melissa was responsible for a large international student group at her university that regularly ran social events, organised through Facebook. She accessed her Facebook account at least three times per day, and described Facebook as playing an important role

¹⁷ While Facebook regularly redesigns its features, the change to the 'Timeline' profile was perhaps the most significant for the purposes of this thesis, although a fuller discussion of that change is beyond the scope of this chapter. I will return to this change in the Conclusion.

in her social life. However, Melissa was also very clear about not wanting people to judge her or base an impression of her solely on her Facebook profile: 'meet me and ask me, don't see that I'm a person on Facebook.' Melissa had not updated her about me information for several years, but would make routine status updates and post photos regularly. Melissa went on to explain that for her, Facebook was centrally about facilitating offline, physical interactions – whether in the form of a quick coffee or a long pub-crawl. This sentiment operates as an interesting counter-point to discourses of over-investment in social network sites. Both before and after events like the ones Melissa organised on behalf of her international student group, Facebook served an important role in organising, then recording, making visible, and archiving the event. Subsequently, the threads of discussion that emerged from photos uploaded to Facebook, for instance, also serve as a 'debriefing' mechanism for the event, where experiences beyond the frame of the photographs are recalled and added to the event's digital trace. I consider this notion of the digital trace and social network sites as archives of transitional experiences for young people further in Chapter 7.

Similar to Melissa's dismissal of the about me section as an important part of her Facebook profile, Simon (15), describes his own 'practice of resistance', by leaving his profile largely blank:

Int.: What about your about me section? What does that say on MySpace?

Simon: Nothing. Nothing. It has one of my friends that I've known since early primary school, and... one that I'm pretty close to and I've met in the start of year 8.

Int.: You've got pictures of those people?

Simon: Nah, just like... their name and how long I've known them, and the other one is "she's my best friend".

Int.: And do you also have interests and music sections?

Simon: Nah, I've taken all of that out... I just have those two and XBox Live games.

Int.: And your friends list?

Simon: Nah, I've taken that out too.

Simon explained that this stripped-back, minimalist approach to MySpace profiles was increasingly common amongst his friends, serving to highlight for Simon key, important social relationships amongst his peers and avoid what Charlotte (19) earlier described as 'crazy layouts', busy with mismatched images and distracting text. Simon's practice of resisting the expected format of the about me section, which I would describe as a kind of 'profile jamming', demonstrates the way in which users of MySpace have been very successful in making the site their own. Despite losing its once large reach to Facebook, MySpace continues to market itself as being 'unique' in this regard. Rather than fixing the original design gap that allowed users to customise the layout of their profile, MySpace embraced these sometimes-messy identity performances, and invited its users to trouble or 'jam' the expected format of the profile.

There is a clear tension in Melissa's account between some elements of the Facebook profile carrying an expectation of constant revision (profile pictures and status updates) whereas other sections (about me, interests, and hobbies) do not appear to require the same level of regular attention. Between sites, exemplified by Simon's approach to a minimalist (and partially subversive) about me section, there is also a difference in conventions that govern 'authentic' impression management practices. Both strategies, however, represent practices of resistance to the form of the profile. There is a curious strain in the way Melissa, for instance, talks about the authentic self. Although

she doesn't use these terms, there is a sense that the impression she manages on Facebook – multiple times each day, at length – is always incomplete, and her profile is just a reference point to the rest of her life. It represents part of that life, but certainly not the whole picture: 'meet me and ask me, don't see that I'm a person on Facebook'. I repeat these words again because they have a great resonance for this project, and the false binary between the offline and the online. They also neatly articulate the way Melissa conceptualises the role of Facebook in her everyday life. While she relies heavily on Facebook as a powerful social utility, her reliance appears, at times, begrudging. She'd much rather spend time with people in-person than mediated by Facebook, but the value of Facebook for Melissa is that it facilitates these offline interactions. Simon's minimalist approach also speaks to that which is beyond the frame of the profile, by leaving sections blank. That Simon does not list his Friends or describe the kind of music he likes does not mean that he has no Friends or doesn't like music, but rather that he has chosen not to articulate those parts of his identity-project on MySpace. His profile serves a narrow performative function, while still telling a powerful story about his two closest friends.

The Friends List and 'The Wall': Collaborative Identity Performance

Both the profile wall (where Friends can post content, including text, images, videos, links, and so on) and the list of Friends itself (visible by default) also serve as devices of identity, although they operate differently from the profile picture and the about me, autobiographical content discussed above, effectively serving as a collaborative form of identity performance which I will discuss below. These elements of the profile also work slightly differently between MySpace and Facebook. On Facebook, the list of Friends appears in a short form on the individual's profile, but can also be viewed 'in full'. On MySpace, the

profile author was prompted to list their 'top friends' which became an important element of the profile. Some participants reported actively resisting this element (such as Simon, 15) while others who had moved on to Facebook, such as Charlotte (19), recall the stress of listing best friends in a hierarchical fashion with some consternation. boyd (2006: 8) explains that 'users will only list people that they know and celebrities that they admire in their Top Friends, often as a way to both demarcate their identity and signal meaningful relationships with others'. On both sites, the full version of the Friends list is searchable. Later iterations on both sites also foreground mutual Friends. For example, if A was visiting the profile of B (where A and B are Friends), and A and B had a Friend in common (C), Facebook would prioritise the presence of C in the short version of B's profile, and also list C in a separate 'mutual Friends' field. Thus, what A sees when visiting B's profile will be different from what other users see, at least in terms of mutual Friends.

The conventions around the wall have shifted somewhat, but in essence the wall continues to act as a space where Friends can leave messages or comments for a profile author, which are generally also visible to (and subject to response from) the profile author's network. On MySpace, when A posted a comment on B's profile, A would have to go to B's profile to respond. On Facebook, this process was eventually streamlined, so that B could comment on A's post directly on their own profile, creating a comment thread, visible to B's network.

It is my argument that rather than being fully controlled by the profile author, the wall and the Friends list operate as a kind of 'collaborative identity performance', where the Friends of an individual contribute to the narrative construction of the profile. While the profile author does decide who to friend

(thus controlling a sense of audience for the performance of identity, as I discuss in Chapter 5), the user does not control how his or her Friends conduct and construct themselves on their own profile or elsewhere on Facebook. For instance, A may articulate a relationship with B, and that Friendship is then made visible, but A does not control how B performs a sense of identity. If C clicks on the link to B's profile while visiting A's profile, the association between A and B forms part of C's impression of A. Similarly, A may, by default, post on B's profile. In this sense, the Friends of users on social network sites play an important part in the performance of the profile author's identity. While these Friends perform their own sense of self on their profiles, their posts and comments on other user's profiles contribute to that user's overall impression. When a user posts a comment on the wall of another user, that comment, unless hidden by modifying the default privacy settings of the profile, is visible to the profile author's network.

This collaborative performance represents a considerable departure from Goffman's (1959) individual-centred dramaturgical framework where the actor is largely responsible for his or her own presentation of self. While the profile author is able to curate posts made by Friends – by deleting or hiding posts, or by changing access settings to the wall – posts that are made by others contribute to the narrative of the profile's author, even if in a limited capacity or on a temporary basis until curation can occur. Madden and Smith's (2010: 3) research on reputation management on social network sites found that 47 per cent of young (18-29) users in their study have deleted 'unwanted' comments. They also found that older participants were much less likely to undertake these practices of curation, demonstrating stronger conventions around impression management on social network sites amongst the younger group in their study.

This produces an interesting 'stage' for the performance of identity that isn't readily likened to offline social spaces, which Goffman's dramaturgical framework could not have accommodated prior to the internet.

To return to the example of Melissa (20) from above, the international student who used Facebook to organise social events for her student group, the articulation of these social exchanges were at the core of her engagement with the site, rather than content she had written about herself (about me information) and long forgotten. Similarly, Brad (20), the tradesperson who was embarrassed to find an intimate exchange between himself and a girl on a Facebook wall was visible to his workmates, through this example also focussed on the role others play in constructing a narrative around himself. While Brad's example represents what I have described as a failure in impression management, given his embarrassment, and Melissa's example demonstrates a reluctance to engage in what she considers impression management, both of these experiences foreground the collaborative nature of identity performance and impression management on social network sites.

Status Updates

Another sub-element of 'the wall', which serves as an important identity device especially on Facebook, is the status update. In the earlier stages of the fieldwork, status updates usually took the form of announcements written in the third-person. For example, 'Jane is at the bank' or 'John is looking forward to the weekend'. In the latter part of the fieldwork, Facebook changed the structure of the status update by instead using the prompt: 'what's on your mind?' This slowly led to users moving away from posting status updates in the third-person, towards first-person announcements: 'I'm at the bank', or 'Why have only half of my students submitted their essays on time? I'm so confused.' While

some users still use the third-person format, my profile observations revealed a trend towards first-person updates over the course of the fieldwork.

As with Lynne (24) and Eric's (20) regular revision of profile pictures discussed above, Cody (21) reported a similar level of commitment to updating his status on Facebook. When asked how frequently he updated his status – usually a single line of text that is broadcast to a news feed, accessible by authorised Friends – Cody provided a vague response: 'pretty regularly,' said with a smirk. In fact, Cody appeared to update his status two to five times per day, documenting everything from mundane activities and what he described as 'random thoughts' (such as song lyrics, opinions on etiquette, and so on) through to declarations of love for his boyfriend. Similarly, Julie (22) reported updating her status at least once per day. Sometimes the topics of her status updates were quite cryptic, 'in-jokes' that she admitted were intended for only 'three or four' or her 438 friends. Thus, for both Cody and Julie, there were instances where status updates delivered to their entire network of Friends were quite specifically directed as a few Friends or one particular person, but also acted as an articulation of a sense of belonging to a partner or a small group of friends, for instance, serving as a narrative thread in the broader performance of identity.

In summary, taking all of these identity devices together – from the profile picture and the about me section, to the listing of Friends and the dynamic space of the wall, I would argue that the performance of identity on social network sites is at once autobiographical and collaborative. Producers generate content for their own pages while also participating in dialogues with their Friends, associated with images, links, status updates and the profiles themselves through 'comment threads'.

Chapter Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated a clear tension between Zuckerberg's philosophy on how Facebook works on the one hand, and the theory and practice of identity – as played out on social network sites – on the other. Goffman's dramaturgical model explains identity as a dynamic performance that alters between stages and audiences. The same can be said for much of the late- and post-modern literature on identity, typified best, perhaps, by the likes of Giddens' (1991) ongoing 'reflexive project of the self', or Kristeva's (1986) 'subject-in-progress', and exemplified by the identity practices of the participants discussed in this chapter. While Zuckerberg's claim that we only have one fixed identity opposes an entire tradition of identity studies and the very experiences of the young participants at the core of this project, alone it wouldn't be concerning enough to become a focal point in my discussion. The introduction of a discourse on integrity, and the argument that multiplicity represents a lack of integrity, however, is deeply problematic.

By way of resisting this discourse, I have highlighted in this chapter a set of strategic practices and approaches to identity performance, especially concerned with impression management through a series of devices of identity, that I would argue represent compelling examples of integrity. That is, these accounts demonstrate a sense of *competency* with the technical mechanisms and 'devices' of identity that social network sites make available, and the narratives created in these spaces are both *coherent* and *stable*. While these descriptors, borrowed from Steele's (1988) definition of integrity are limited, they do work to extend this framing of integrity into a set of characteristics that can be operationalised to better explain the phenomenon – interaction on social network sites – that this thesis addresses. In the end, beyond the limitations of

these spaces driven by imperatives of transparency, it is the everyday producers of these sites who will determine their longevity and continued success. While the media they are using (Facebook in particular) may not lend easily or intuitively themselves to multiplicity, the young people in this study are articulating an underlying multiplicity in the narratives they construct and the performances they are enacting.

boyd (2007: 141) has argued that without a long-standing history of conventions or what she describes as 'contextual frameworks' for *being* in online social spaces, users of these sites must establish their own conventions. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, this process of establishing norms and conventions for being in online social spaces is clearly occurring and is ongoing. However, I would also contend that there *is* actually a long-standing history of conventions and principles upon which these frameworks are being built: what Goffman referred to as the presentation of self in everyday life. The lessons and strategies for existing in physical social spaces are being carried over to online social spaces. While this may appear to be an obvious observation, it is also worth highlighting because it works as a good example of where the online/offline binary can be destabilised. There are limitations to theories such as Goffman's dramaturgical framework when applied to online social spaces, as I have flagged above, because of the ways in which profile-based social network sites collapse relationships. In the next chapter, I will continue to demonstrate how the participants in this study are working to exert a sense of control over their presence online through the strategic management of friending practices. Despite the nuances and the unique challenges associated with social network sites, I would challenge boyd's (2007: 141) assumption that social interaction in these spaces is devoid of a long-standing history of

conventions. The everyday is the site upon which the conventions and strategies of impression management that are emerging on social network sites have been forged.

As Pinch (2010) recalls, Goffman liked to end each piece of his writing with a reminder about the 'fragility of social life' as we humans struggle to play our parts in the world and negotiate our 'fractured selves' (Pinch 2010: 424). While Pinch concludes by contending that the internet has perhaps made this struggle harder, I would err more towards optimism about the role of the internet in the lives of its users and in identity-projects more broadly. Rather than complicating and compounding difficulties or destabilising individuals' sense of self beyond coherence, the internet makes these performances visible. Social network sites give these reflexively constructed self-narratives a powerful voice – not powerful because anyone in the world can hear it, but because the people that matter to the average person can hear it: friends, family, colleagues, school pals and characters collected along the way. In the following chapter, I explore the practical and symbolic mechanisms by which users exert control in these spaces, allowing them to conceptualise an audience for their performances of identity, and connect with those people of consequence.

Chapter 5: Friendship and Control

I'm very picky with who I accept as a Friend. If I don't know them or if I haven't met them or if they're a friend of a friend who I've heard of but I haven't met, I don't accept them... that's because my personal information is quite detailed, and with all this stuff like stalking and identity theft you've gotta be vigilant. I think a lot of young people nowadays - correct me if I'm wrong - aren't vigilant enough when it comes to shit like that. They leave themselves wide open to all kinds of crap.

(Jamie, 27)

Jamie is a 27-year-old mother who works in the broadcast/entertainment industry, while also studying writing at university. The way she reproduces powerful discourses about privacy and 'vigilance' is quite striking. She went on to explain that this vigilance was not only motivated out of a desire to protect herself, but also her family, especially her young children. She is clearly concerned about the threat of 'stalkers' and 'creeps'¹⁸ who would seek to expose and exploit her. She generalises this concern to all young people, 'a lot' of whom, she thinks, lack the necessary vigilance to protect themselves or to properly manage their own presence online. Jamie's thoughts here serve as a good example of how popular discourse concerned with online privacy can write itself back onto the young people it seeks to frame. Jamie was the oldest participant in the study, and also the most critical about 'young people nowadays', presumably because of the perceived distance she felt between herself and 'young people', as someone in her late 20s with children of her own. While the broad parameters of 'youth' within the project¹⁹ enabled Jamie to be included, Jamie did not necessarily think of herself as a young person, although

¹⁸ Terms from the vernacular used to describe both harmless snooping on friends of friends, and also the more invasive, 'threatening and potentially dangerous' (Meloy 1998: 2) definition of stalking.

¹⁹ See Chapter 3, 'participant selection criteria' for a more detailed framing of the use of the term 'youth'.

she did 'do some youthful things', resonating with Frith's (2005) broad framing of youth as encompassing young people, an attitude, and an institution.

At the core of the above extract from my interview with Jamie is a strong sense of control over her Facebook profile. In the first instance, this control is about delimiting the concept of Friend. On social network sites, it is the articulation of Friendship that grants access. Being someone's Friend on Facebook generally equates to a level of access to the profile content. The friending process allows users to control and conceptualise their audience, which, as I have discussed previously, is central for effective impression management. How, then, do users of social network sites determine what a Friend is? As multiple social relationships are collapsed under the banner of Friendship on social network sites, important issues about privacy and audience management need to be addressed. What constitutes Friendship in the Facebook era? Is a Friend on Facebook or MySpace the same as the traditional notion of friend? What are the criteria young people in this study deploy for determining what constitutes a Friend? What happens when these criteria change, or a person ceases to be a friend/Friend? How do young people deal with unsolicited contact (stalkers, creeps, randoms) in these private spaces? In the previous chapter, I outlined a variety of ways in which the young people in this study sought to foster a sense of identity through a set of impression management practices, centrally concerned with questions of integrity and authenticity. In this chapter, I continue to explore the conventions and practices of identity, albeit from a different perspective, by exploring Friendship in more detail.

In achieving these objectives, I have divided this chapter into three parts. In part one, I briefly consider a sociological framing of friendship, and further

advance my argument that a dramaturgical approach to understanding identity-work on social network sites also requires a conceptual connection between Friend and audience, as the user's Friends on social network sites also serve as the audience from a dramaturgical perspective. I also extend this understanding of Friendship to encompass an articulation and extension of social capital. In part two, I contend that social network sites are increasingly regarded as private spaces where young people are 'hanging out' and articulating or playing with notions of identity and belonging. Some social networks have even been likened to bedrooms for teenagers (Pearson 2009), for instance, or are operating alongside other physical spaces like shopping centres and parks as spaces for casual youth interaction (boyd 2011a). I problematise these metaphors, but also develop a conceptual framework around the 'spaces' of social network sites through forms of control: both *symbolic* (the content that constitutes a profile, such as images and autobiographical about me writing), and *practical* (who is permitted access to these spaces, and how this access is managed through friending). Finally, in part three, I explore this notion of practical control through a discussion of the multiple sets of friending practices I have observed in this study, that can be loosely grouped around markers of both low (public) and high (private) levels of control. Centrally, then, this chapter is concerned with exploring what constitutes 'Friendship' for young users of social network sites, and considering how these spaces are being spatially conceptualised in terms of privacy and imagined audience.

Towards Friendship

As I have explained, I capitalise the term Friend, here (consistent with boyd, 2008a: 134) to denote usage on social network sites, where a Friend describes

a varied set of relationships that also includes family, colleagues, long-lost school friends and casual acquaintances. Friend can also serve as a verb (to friend someone), associated with the more traditional term 'befriend', albeit with a slightly different, more technical, set of implications. When used as a verb, I am again guided by the literature to use the lowercase friend (to friend) or friending. Miller (2011: 10) observes that in Trinidad, 'to friend' is an old and often employed term, meaning to have sex with someone, further complicating the terminology around Facebook in this cultural context. boyd's (2007; 2008a; 2010) research has followed the development of social network sites since Friendster was released in 2003, and argues that these online social platforms are simply new media that allow for the maintenance and articulation of existing relationships. boyd notices that users of Friendster, even in 2003, were being challenged by the site's 'flattening' of relationship types into the single category of Friend. boyd points out that 'wading through new forms of individual and community interactions can be both terrifying and exhilarating' (2008a: 134), as can the practices and conventions that emerge in these spaces, especially around the constitution of Friendship. As a contrast with the terms *Friend* and *Friendship*, I use the lower case *friend* and *friendship* to describe a more traditional usage of the term, not complicated by the affordances of Facebook or MySpace.

Before I can tease out some distinction between friendship and Friendship, however, it is useful to posit some definition of what I have described here as a 'traditional' sense of friendship, which implies some sense of intimacy or at the very least, familiarity. As I will explain, it is possible to become someone's Friend without necessarily being their friend. In the vernacular, there is a very

important distinction between being someone's 'Friend on Facebook' and simply being someone's friend.

Early 19th century cartographer Matthew Flinders wrote in a letter in 1805 that friendship is 'the almost indescribable communion of mind, the similarity of sentiment and of taste, and that jumping together of the heart' (in Little 1993: 1). The sociological understanding of friendship positions it as a personal, unspecialised relationship that appears to serve no singular, immediate or readily definable purpose. In terms of what makes a good friendship, homogeneity appears to be a 'correlate or facilitating condition', but not a pre-requisite (Silver, 1990, p. 1476). Silver goes on to argue that while friendship has no formal classifications (or defined value) in systems of law or governance, there is some underlying implication that friendships are based on an exchange of utility. Silver also observed that 'friendship is diminished in moral quality if friends consciously monitor the balance of exchange between them' (1990, p. 1477).

Allen (1998: 687) contends that 'friendship is patterned according to social conventions', and that it is therefore inappropriate to regard friendship as a 'natural' relationship. Rather, according to Allen, friendship is influenced by structural characteristics such as gender and class and economic formations. However, Allen does recognise that these structures are dynamic and thus what constitutes friendship for the individual is also susceptible to change. Allen argues that friendship is also central to understanding individual identity, as it can 'signify the people we "really" are' given that friendships are 'independent of structural location' (1998: 700). In a study of same-sex friendships, Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that while no clear gender differences exist in quantity or time spent with friends, the way individuals interact with friends does appear

to be gendered. While women reported primarily sharing emotionally and talking more with other female friends, men reported engaging in activities and doing things together. In a more recent study, consistent with Caldwell and Peplau's findings, Benenson and Christakos (2003) found that female friendships are characterised by a greater sense of intimacy. Subsequently, women are positioned in this research as exhibiting 'greater vulnerability' (Benenson & Christakos 2003: 1123) in their friendships, and appear to experience higher levels of distress when friendships end. The subtext to this gendered analysis of friendships is that these relationships can potentially be both rewarding and traumatic if invested with a sense of intimacy.

Thus, the notion of friendship is at once central to social cohesion, ubiquitous and rewarding, while also being taboo to quantify, difficult to pin down and even traumatic. To return to Flinders, our early 19th century cartographer who wrote his letter to a friend from exile in the hopes that his friend could secure his pardon (Little 1993: 259), it is clear that friendships are built on and can revolve around functional exchanges (utility), but that these exchanges do not themselves constitute the relationship. While 'similarity of sentiment and of taste' (Flinders in Little, 1993: 1) or homogeneity between individuals appears to facilitate friendships, sameness is certainly not a requirement. Thus, we are left with Flinders' 'jumping together of the heart', perhaps working as a suitably abstract descriptor given the sociological reluctance to provide clear parameters for or a definition of friendship.

Regardless of context and gender differences, friendship is an important socio-cultural phenomenon that is difficult to define. It occurs in multiple configurations and styles, and results in varying levels of utility. The point is, that despite this long tradition of not pinning friendship down, users of social

network sites are regularly asked what it is that constitutes friendship. Who would they accept a Friend request from, or initiate a Friend request with, and who would they deny? Under what circumstances might they end a Friendship on a social network site, and delete the visible articulation of that social tie? For the average user, they have had to undertake this process (at least on the friending end, if not the deleting end) literally hundreds of times. Thus, this chapter aims to document and chart the deliberate and pre-determined set of friending strategies that young users of social network sites in Australia are deploying to exert a sense of practical control over their online social spaces. These formalised articulations of Friendship require a degree of reflexive thinking that is often under-scrutinised.

Social Ties and Social Capital

Central to the importance of Friendship on social network sites is the access Friendship grants individuals. Generally, and usually by default, the profiles that constitute these networks are largely private. That is, they cannot be accessed by the average internet user. To gain access to a full profile, for instance, X must first create an account, which provides a limited level of access. If X is trying to access Y's profile, and Y limits most of their profile content to only be available to Friends, X will only be able to see the thumbnail version of Y's profile picture and Y's name. If X sends a 'Friend request' to Y, however, Y can then approve or deny that request, where approving will (by default) result in profile access privileges for X. X will then be able to access, view, interact with (comment on, 'like') Y's profile.

Beyond these technical implications associated with friending, social network sites allow users to articulate a social tie between each other. Granovetter (1973: 1361) provisionally describes the strength of a social tie between two

individuals as based on a 'combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie'. Using these characteristics, then, it is presumably possible for individuals to assign a strength value to their social ties, to organise their social networks into a hierarchy from strongest ties to weakest ties. In practice, at an everyday level, this might be a futile and ever-changing process, but as discussed earlier, social network sites invite users to do just this. In the first instance, the friending process requires that users set what I would describe as a 'strength threshold' for accepting or initiating a Friend request. When do you share a 'strong enough' tie with someone for you to articulate that social tie online, and thus provide that individual with access to your profile? Just as in the previous section concerned with pinning down a definition for friendship, being specific about tie strength may be just as futile and variable, and yet a necessary step in managing a sense of audience, and thus privacy, on social network sites.

Donath and boyd (2004: 72) argue that engaging with someone in the 'context of their connections' can be very telling. Through association, or shared ties, an individual's social status, political and religious beliefs, cultural tastes and so on can be inferred. This is a fraught and yet oft-deployed assumption, returning to that implied sense of homogeneity amongst friends from the earlier definitions of friendship. Donath and boyd go on to point out that the functional value of this inference is also centred around trust, whereby a shared connection (a mutual friend) can lend a sense of trust by way of an existing relationship. Referees in application processes, for instance, serve in this manner. Donath and boyd explain that displaying social connections has a long precedent in physical spaces, from having parties to featuring photos of friends and family in the

home or the office, from simply appearing in public with an acquaintance through to 'name-dropping' to impress or claim social status. In non-physical spaces, such as on social network sites, Donath and boyd argue that displaying these connections is equally if not more important, as they prove that the profile author exists and is 'real'.

The articulation of social ties also works to represent a sense of social capital, a broad, abstract measure of benefits derived from a collective (Bourdieu 1984). Coleman (1988: 98) defines social capital as 'a particular kind of resource available to an actor'. Social capital is productive, in that it can make possible certain achievements that otherwise would not be possible (getting a certain job, for instance), and it inheres in the relationships between and among actors. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) note that the internet has been linked to both increases and decreases in social capital, but their own research demonstrates a positive relationship between Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital. In particular, their college student participants were primarily engaged in contact with high school friends and people from their university, implying that their participants were using Facebook 'to crystallize relationships that might otherwise remain ephemeral' (Ellison et al. 2007: 19). They found a strong relationship between Facebook use and the accumulation of social capital. Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) produced similar findings (albeit with a more tempered conclusion), again with college students, but with a greater focus on more specific forms of social capital such as social trust, civic engagement, and political participation. In both studies, Facebook served to strengthen weak ties 'cheaply and easily' (Ellison et al. 2007: 18) and to draw out what Haythornthwaite (2002: 385) describes as latent ties, or ties that exist technically but have not yet been 'activated'. For

example, individuals who are students at the same university or are fans of the same band or are employees of the same company share a tie, but they may have never met or may not know of each other directly. In these situations, their tie is latent. Once they forge a connection and come to 'know' each other, their tie is 'activated'. The research described above (Haythornthwaite 2002; Ellison et al. 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2009; and also Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2011) indicates that Facebook is effective in helping to activate latent ties and strengthen weak ones, which contradicts assumptions that regular and sustained Facebook usage is isolating and disengaging (Marche 2012). Social network site usage is generative, and serves not only to articulate social ties, but also to build social capital.

Ganley and Lampe (2009: 267) argue that 'social capital is both an outcome gained by individuals in an online community and a tool for facilitating the governance of such spaces'. For Ganley and Lampe, this meant meeting new people – networking – through a particular site: Slashdot²⁰. The important distinction is that while social network sites like MySpace and Facebook serve in the accumulation of social capital, they do so by strengthening weak ties and activating latent ties, rather than forging new ties entirely as in Ganley and Lampe's study. Social network sites like MySpace and Facebook are not so much spaces where social ties are created, but rather where social ties and thus social capital is articulated, strengthened and made visible. This important distinction was discussed in Chapter 2, but it is worth reiterating here: while there are many sites on the social web that serve to create new connections between individuals based on common interests, for instance (*networking* sites,

²⁰ Slashdot is 'a news and commentary site founded in 1997 which is dedicated to technology issues, especially those focused on open source software. It attracts over 600,000 unique visitors a day' (Ganley & Lampe 2009: 269).

like Slashdot from Ganley and Lampe's study), the social network sites that this thesis is concerned with *build on existing social relationships*, and serve to articulate (and strengthen) those relationships.

Despite this distinction, the role of social capital in 'facilitating governance of [these] spaces' (Ganley & Lampe 2009: 267) is still critical. To maintain a sense of privacy and control on a social network site also requires a deliberate strategy for managing Friendship. Friendship and privacy, then, in this context, are closely related. Friending an individual on a social network site also implicitly requires some investment of trust by granting another individual access to what might be conceptualised as a private space.

Privacy

Gross and Acquisti (2005) are concerned about the amount of information freely disclosed by the majority of the 4000 college participants in their study of 'information revelation' on Facebook. They describe their participants as oblivious or unconcerned about privacy, and point towards the implications for lax privacy settings for 'stalking', identity theft, and other nefarious uses of personal information, aligning neatly with Jamie's (27) assertion at the beginning of this chapter that users of social network sites must be 'vigilant' to protect themselves and their privacy online. Gross and Acquisti go on to argue that relying on the default Facebook profile settings is insufficient, thus resisting Zuckerberg's open and transparent approach to information discussed in the previous chapter. With research such as this supporting popular assumptions about a lack of privacy online, it is easy to see how Jamie can so readily reproduce these discourses, despite her own 'vigilance' when it comes to privacy.

In a study of 704 college students in the United States, the majority of whom were users of MySpace and Facebook, Tufekci (2008a: 26) found that while users of social network sites were not 'overly worried' about online privacy, consistent with the findings from Gross and Acquisti (2005) they did exhibit a '*complexity...* [in their] audience management and boundary negotiation[s]' (Tufekci 2008a: 33, italics added). In a 2009 qualitative study consisting of 16 London-based undergraduates, West, Lewis and Currie (2009) begin to account for the complexity suggested by Tufekci. Their respondents reported Facebook Friends included various kinds of acquaintances including cousins, old school friends and current university friends. When asked about family, especially parents on Facebook, most of the participants in the study reported some anxiety and apprehension:

It... seems so awkward to add your parents ... but I'd have a conversation about it. I'd be like, 'Look guys, I don't want to be rude but I think it's an invasion of my privacy if you're looking at my Facebook profile, because it's to do with my friends, and whatever I'm doing at university' and they'd be fine with it.

(Participant Sophie in West, Lewis & Currie, 2009: 620)

In an ethnographic study of a 'small group of socially connected 20-something Facebook users' in Toronto, Raynes-Goldie (2010: 2) argues that engaging with new media in the 'age of Facebook' comes at a cost: 'In the same way many people give away some of their personal information in exchange for the perks of an Air Miles card, users of Facebook benefit from their use of the site at the cost of their privacy'. Raynes-Goldie goes on to argue that while the young people in her study were clearly concerned about privacy, they were concerned about a particular form of privacy: 'social privacy' rather than 'institutional privacy'. That is, her participants were more concerned about controlling access to personal information (social privacy) rather than how Facebook itself, as a

corporate entity, used that information (institutional privacy). While there was some sensitivity to institutional privacy, my participants also actively describe a much stronger focus on Raynes-Goldie's notion of social privacy. The implications for social privacy, then, revolve around what photos one's ex-partner can access (as per Raynes-Goldie's example) or what a future employer can access, or to return to the example above from West et al. (2009), what one's parents can access.

In the remainder of this chapter, my focus will be on exploring the 'complexity' noted by Tufekci (2008a) by unpacking the many practices through which privacy is enacted, and coming to terms with the very basic and essential question this section has asked: what is Friendship? While I explore this complexity, I am also deeply concerned about tempering discourses that strip young people of their agency and do not attend to the many nuanced ways in which control is exerted (or not) in online social spaces. The loss-of-privacy sentiment advanced by Raynes-Goldie (2010) is difficult to resist. A decade ago it was common practice to never use your full, 'real' name online. Now, Facebook requires its users to use their full names on their profiles, shifting the culture of online anonymity entirely (Kushin & Kitchener 2009). In drawing attention to this new terrain of privacy and the investment people make in the social web, are we at risk of underplaying the strategic practices of control people exercise in these spaces? Thus, before I reach the third and final section describing the friending practices I have observed in this study, in the following section I will explore the reconceptualisation of 'space' on MySpace and Facebook, and drawing attention to the mechanisms of control these spaces offer.

Bedroom Metaphors: Controlling and Conceptualising Audience

Reconceptualising 'Space'

Using full, 'real' names online may appear to be a minor shift in practice, but as Kushin and Kitchener (2009) explain in their research on political discourses on Facebook, anonymity produces uncivility, whereas operating under 'real names' produces a sense of accountability. This minor shift in conventions is, in fact, quite important. This and the broader shift which Raynes-Goldie (2010) refers to, are enabled by our changing understanding of the internet and our conceptualisation of the medium as a non-physical space that aligns with our offline lives, to the point where a distinction between online and offline becomes untenable.

Initially, the internet was regarded as an anonymous utopia of experimentation and potential: '[the internet] links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the forms of our communities, our very identities' (Turkle 1995: 9). While these potentialities still exist, the everyday nature of the internet, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, has caused a shift in the way the internet itself is discussed and understood. In the almost two decades since Turkle's *Life on the Screen* was published, those millions of people have swelled to billions. Individuals with access to the internet are increasingly conducting their everyday lives through it, leaving their 'traces' (Bowker 2007: 22) wherever they 'surf'.

boyd argues that as our physical space becomes increasingly regulated, especially the space of young people, practices of socialisation that come from informal 'hanging out' are forced to shift out of shopping centres and parks, and into 'networked publics' (boyd, 2007a, p. 9) that exist on social network sites. As

I will discuss below, scholars such as Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) and Pearson (2009) have even begun to liken these online social spaces to bedrooms; spaces in which access is controlled and objects (especially for young people) play important symbolic roles in the performance of identity. In this section, I discuss the implication of these metaphors for our broad understanding of the social web, but also for specific everyday strategies of interaction like friending.

Symbolic and Practical Control

In their study of blogging website LiveJournal, Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) conducted a comparative exploration between the virtual spaces inhabited by young people and the bedroom. Established in the late 1990s, LiveJournal is an online social space where users can record reflective diary-style entries. The site also has a system of privacy not too far removed from the privacy practices observable on MySpace and Facebook. LiveJournal, for instance, also included a Friends-List which users could populate with contacts and allow only those individuals access to their journal entries. Hodkinson (2006) found that, consistent with boyd's (2007a; 2010) work on social network sites, users of LiveJournal emphasised the value of the platform for maintaining contact with existing friends. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008: 28) argue that the bedroom is 'the first individually oriented physical space of young people's lives', enabling them to draw parallels between the bedroom and LiveJournal, focusing on both the *symbolic* and *practical* control young people have over these spaces. They argue that both the teenage bedroom and LiveJournal tend to be highly regulated in terms of access (practical control) and content (symbolic control): 'An emphasis on the perceived safety and individual freedom afforded by

personally owned space is also of considerable importance to young people's use of online journals' (Hodkinson & Lincoln 2008: 32).

The parallels between LiveJournal and social network sites allow for an extension of this model to sites like MySpace and Facebook, although there are also clear separations. While the spaces discussed by Hodkinson and Lincoln often involve a strong sense of intimacy, as the journal entries they discuss often divulge very personal reflections, the profiles of social network site users in this study sometimes lack this strong sense of intimacy. Presumably, this difference is due to the differences in perceived audience. However, regardless of the level of intimacy in exchanges, individuals in both spaces are clearly exercising a similar kind of symbolic and practical control over the content in these spaces. Symbolic control manifests through text, images and a variety of other tools, and practical control is evident by way of an increasingly strategic deployment of privacy strategies that this chapter explores.

While my focus in this chapter is on friending practices, and thus the extent to which practical control over social network sites is exercised, it is also useful to retrospectively frame some of the discussion of findings in the previous chapter through Hodkinson and Lincoln's (2008) framework of symbolic control. As discussed previously, the extent to which symbolic control is exercised on social network sites varied greatly from user to user in this study. Some individuals preferred to populate their profiles with as little content as possible (a performance of identity in itself) and didn't actively manage their impression, while others regularly updated and managed their performance of self through various identity-tools, and still others went through phases of impression management and apathy or existed in the middle-ground on a spectrum between actively exercising symbolic control or not. In the case of the latter, not

being seen to care, or describing yourself as not caring about the going-ons of Facebook in an interview scenario, could in fact coherently (even by way of contradiction) run alongside very active back-stage impression management practices.²¹

As an example of a user at the more apathetic end of the symbolic control spectrum, recall Melissa (20) from the previous chapter. When asked to explain why she didn't keep information (such as hobbies and interests) on her profile up-to-date, she explained, 'it's not important to me... meet me and ask me, don't see that I'm a person on Facebook'. Similarly, Simon (15) explained that on his MySpace profile he went through phases of information sharing, whereby sometimes he would populate his profile with images, text and backgrounds, and other times he would remove the content and only have a black background. Other users, however, closely curate hundreds (and even thousands) of images and well thought-out descriptions of interests, hobbies, favourite books and television programmes. Lynne (24), for instance, updated and edited her MySpace profile with different profile pictures and songs on a daily basis to reflect her mood, and Eric (20) would oscillate between profile pictures to reflect his different sides.

Context Collapse and Rethinking the Glass Bedroom

Pearson (2009) draws attention to how online forms of sociality tend to collapse the front-stage/back-stage modes of performance in Goffman's theoretical framework. Pearson argues that there is a blurring between public and private.

At the basis of this argument is a concern about audiences and the notion that

²¹ Unfortunately, this is one of the limitations of the research design: a reliance on self reporting. While the observation of profiles was included in the design to at least partially address this limitation, it was very difficult to get an accurate sense of the extent to which a user might be deleting posts, untagging themselves in photos, de-friending and so on, all of which would constitute practices of impression management. These difficult to perceive processes would be part of a backstage in Goffman's dramaturgical framework.

what constitutes an audience (Friends) on a social network site has become difficult to pin down. She argues that it is highly problematic performing a sense of self to a heterogeneous audience that can include both intimate relationships, professional contacts and acquaintances. To resolve some of the tensions that she argues are inherent in the notion of online identity performance, Pearson presents the glass bedroom as a useful metaphoric construct:

The metaphor can take a number of forms, but at its core it describes a bedroom with walls made of glass. Inside the bedroom, private conversations and intimate exchanges occur, each with varying awareness of distant friends and strangers moving past transparent walls that separate groups from more deliberate and constructed 'outside' displays. The glass bedroom itself is not an entirely private space, nor a true backstage space as Goffman articulated, though it takes on elements of both over the course of its use. It is a bridge that is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language.

(Pearson 2009: 2)

While this metaphor is useful to a certain extent, it also has its limitations. Pearson's model renders the transparency of the profile as common to all visitors, implying that everyone who visits a certain profile will see the same content. In fact, 'Friends lists', for instance, allow the profile author to group their Friends and give groups varying levels of access to a profile. For example, casual acquaintances can be added to a 'restricted' list with minimal profile viewing privileges, work colleagues and parents may be denied access to photos the user is tagged in, and exes may be kept on as a Friend but left without wall posting or viewing privileges. Thus, to confuse the metaphor slightly, the performative space of the profile becomes multiple and varied depending on the individual accessing it: multiple bedrooms, each designed for a particular visitor. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the actor is multiplied and

simultaneously performs different versions of self on separate stages to multiple audiences.

The performance of multiple versions of self in one space on social network sites appears to be a key skill of online sociality that young people are developing and incorporating into their everyday social practices. Discussions tend to construct online privacy in a limited, uni-dimensional format. Pearson's (2009) glass bedroom metaphor draws in Goffman's dramaturgical framework, for instance, but over-simplifies privacy controls and obfuscates the agency and control young people are exercising in these spaces. Combining the LiveJournal-as-bedroom model by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) which foregrounds control with Pearson's glass bedroom metaphor provides us with a curious spatial conceptualisation which is at once controlled (both practically by some moderation of who can and cannot enter and symbolically by the content and imagery) and transparent in terms of audience. For this model of 'controlled transparency' to be effective, however, it must also account for the complexity in both privacy settings between and within different social network sites and the complexity in friending strategies that users are developing and practicing.

Thus far, there has been a tendency in the discourse around these sites to overlook this growing complexity. Notable recent exceptions include the work of Lampe and Ellison (2010) on young athletes' use of Facebook, and a study by Patchin and Hinduja (2010) on adolescents' use of MySpace. These studies explore Tufekci's (2008a) hint at complexity in audience management and boundary negotiation, demonstrating the different mechanisms of practical control young people are exerting in these spaces. For Lampe and Ellison (2010), this came in the form of student athletes who had refined a clear conceptualisation of their Facebook audiences and modified their performances

of identity appropriately. For Patchin and Hinduja (2010), it was the increasing discretion with which young MySpace users were sharing information online, in direct contrast to the earlier research by Gross and Acquisti (2005) discussed above.

In the final section of this chapter, I draw on the array of friending practices I have observed in this study to reassert the complexity and the variety of mechanisms of practical control being exerted by young people in these spaces.

A Multiplicity of Friending Practices

Catherine: I can't think of any [Friends I have on Facebook that] I haven't met. Like people have tried to become my Friend but even though they're Friends with other people I just ignore them. I'm pretty sure.

Int.: So when someone sends you a Friend request, but you've never met them, you don't accept them even if you have mutual friends?

Catherine: Not usually.

Int.: What about people that use Facebook to meet new people?

Catherine: [laughs] That's not what I'm there for. I don't know, *I just I don't think I could be friends with someone I haven't met face-to-face*. Sure you can talk to them and stuff, but I just... yeah, not my kind of thing.

Int.: Okay. What about people that you've met - say, once - at a party. A friend of a friend. You have a conversation with them, they add you a couple of days later - would you accept them?

Catherine: Yes.

Int.: What about people you work with?

Catherine: I accept them.

Int.: So anyone you've had a conversation with you'd call a Friend?

Catherine: On Facebook, yes. They'd be seen as my Friend. *But in reality...* yeah, I'm Friends with my workmates and stuff but if I just had a conversation with someone, they're *not my real friend*.

Catherine is a 20-year-old university student studying communications who also works in retail. Her approach to friending is fairly typical, consistent with the global findings on friending practices discussed earlier that frame social network sites as spaces in which existing relationships are articulated and made visible, rather than as spaces in which new connections are made (boyd 2007a; Joinson 2008; Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez & Schuler 2008). Beyond this, it is the way in which Catherine describes the difference between a 'Facebook Friend' and a 'real friend' (emphasised above in italics) that is most critical for the purposes of this chapter. Catherine will friend people she has met and had a conversation with – she will give them access to the digital traces of her life, to photos, to information about her upbringing as part of the Hare Krishna faith – but her Friends might not be her 'real friends'. For Catherine, you need to have a deeper exchange with someone beyond a single conversation to be 'real' friends in the traditional sense, but being Facebook Friends is something looser. It's not that the exchanges Catherine has on Facebook are meaningless, in fact she specifically recounts situations where she's had 'D & Ms' (deep and 'meaningful', or deep and meaningful conversations) with Friends, mediated by Facebook, but Catherine doesn't believe that these exchanges are possible, for her at least, without first developing a friendship offline, face-to-face.

In this section I seek to make visible various friending practices, which can loosely be framed as a 'spectrum' of practices (with high levels of practical control at one end of the spectrum, and low levels of practical controls at the other), although this framing implies a much neater situation than actually exists. Not only does each social network site have a different set of privacy

controls to negotiate, but each user also has their own set of strategies for managing their own privacy that do not fit neatly into a linear spectrum or another neat model of practices. MySpace and Facebook, for instance, while both operating on very similar profile-based systems, are sites of very different social practices. MySpace profiles are more likely to be public than Facebook profiles, and are also more likely to be highly expressive and creative in both content (poetry or images instead of, or as a self-description) and design (through third-party layout customisation). And yet, the conventions around using 'real names' is different between the sites. On Facebook it is required, whereas on MySpace users generally adopt an alias or a nickname. Some MySpace users can only be found by searching for the user's email address, which may not be linked to their real name. Thus, these creators of MySpace profiles are at least partially insulated from casual 'searchability' (boyd 2007a) when compared to default²² Facebook profiles. Thus, a 'public' MySpace profile might be relatively invisible without the correct search criteria, whereas a 'private' Facebook profile might be the first result in a search on an individual's name. To return to Stern (2004), referred to in Chapter 3, the distinction between public and private is much messier than a simple binary would imply. Part of this messiness is related to the awkward array of friending strategies that I will discuss here, some of which contain clear rules such as only friending people you've had a conversation with (like Catherine) and others that involve looser distinctions, as when Adam (16) only Friends people he knows *unless* they are 'hot girls'.

²² It is possible to change your privacy settings on Facebook to be excluded from search results, by either name, phone number (when provided) or email address.

Accepting or Rejecting Randoms: Low Levels of Practical Control

To return to Hodkinson and Lincoln's (2008) model, the friending practices discussed here can be understood through the notion of practical control. The public profile, which can be viewed (although not always engaged with or contributed to) by any individual with access to the internet, best exemplified low levels of practical control. This particular approach to (or non-participation in) privacy is increasingly rare (Patchin and Hinduja 2010). David (23) was the only one of two participants who reported having a public profile and also had the most relaxed friending strategy. David is a 23-year-old electrical technician who left high school after grade 10²³. At the time of the interview he was applying to become a full-time member of the Australian Defence Force. Previously David had been in the ADF as part of the Army Reserve. David would accept Friend requests from essentially any individual with only rare exceptions:

Int.: When you get a Friend request from someone, what's the process you go through?

David: I don't care... well, it depends. I've still got heaps of people through the Defence Force that I haven't seen since 2004, that add me as a Friend. And other people who I run into or just random people that don't even know me. It doesn't really bother me. If they know me or if they've seen me, they know what I'm like.

Int.: So you've never denied anyone to be your Friend?

David: Yeah I have a couple of people.

Int.: What were the circumstances there?

David: They were complete fuckwits²⁴ to be honest.

Int.: Okay. So you knew them already?

²³ Students in year 10 or grade 10 in the Australian system are generally around 15-16 years old.

²⁴ Originating in Australia, 'fuckwit' is a slang term for 'a stupid or contemptible person; an idiot' (Oxford English Dictionary 2012).

David: Yeah. I knew them. And I was like “nuh you're a dickhead, see you later”.

Int.: Have you seen them since? Has it been awkward?

David: Yeah. I've seen them since. They're like “how come you didn't add me as a friend?” and I said “What do you mean? I don't know how Facebook works!”

There's something liberating about not knowing how something works. It lets you off the hook. David also used this strategy throughout the interview itself, sometimes avoiding questions by claiming he didn't know how Facebook 'really' worked. Despite initially claiming not to care about who he Friendened on Facebook, with a bit of probing David began to describe people he had not Friendened: 'fuckwits' and 'dickheads'. Denying a Friendship request from these individuals wasn't so much about wanting to limit what they could access on his profile as it was about not wanting to be associated with them. As Donath and boyd (2004: 72) argued, the profile author is perceived not only through their own conduct, but through the 'context of their connections'. David chose not to articulate a social tie with certain people he found to be undesirable or contemptible, but otherwise exerted a very low level of practical control.

The other way to interpret David's avoidance of 'dickheads' on Facebook is through the symbolic gesture of *not* friending someone. Not only does David avoid a social tie that he feels is undesirable (and the subsequent articulation and record of that tie to the rest of his network), but that act of not friending someone can also serve as a kind of affront. An affront that, as can be seen from the interview extract above, is worthy of an in-person follow-up: 'how come you didn't add me as a friend?' David's response, that he doesn't know how Facebook works, can also be interpreted as David not caring enough about the

'dickead' in question to figure out how Facebook works, serving as a potent symbolic gesture in itself.

Debra, a 21-year-old journalism student, has an unusual approach to friending on Facebook, which serves as a useful demonstration of the messiness of any kind of attempt to frame these friending practices into a spectrum. Debra reported having an open (public) profile, but was highly restrictive when it came to adding Friends or accepting Friend requests: 'When it was set to private I got lots of add requests, so I just made it public so all those people from high school could have a snoop.' Her justification for this unusual strategy – a profile visible to anyone on Facebook, but stringent friending practices – was that people are simply curious about other people's lives, and she had no problem allowing them to indulge their curiosity. However, for Debra, adding someone as a Friend on Facebook was an important act that she didn't undertake lightly, friending only people she thought of as real friends. Debra's public access approach is highly strategic, allowing for the curiosity of her audience (described here as 'snooping', and expressed in the vernacular as 'stalking' and 'creeping') but also justifying her strict friending practices. For both David and Debra, the articulation of the visible social tie was more important than controlling access to profile information.

In addition to terms like snooping, stalking, and creeping, the term 'randoms' (random people) emerged regularly in interviews. The term has also been noted by Hammond (2007) and Westlake (2008), and essentially refers to strangers that participants have come into contact with online. Whether or not someone Friends randoms, then, is an effective indicator of the extent to which they conceptualise the 'spaces' of social network sites as private or as more open.

While David was happy to friend randoms, Debra was not, and instead was very strict about who she would friend.

Investigating Before Friending

When asked to describe the process she went through when receiving a Friend request on Facebook, Julie, a 22-year-old nursing student, responded: 'I try to see if we have friends in common first to see why they've added me, and if we don't I just delete them or I ask some of our mutual Friends "Who is this person and why are they adding me?"' When a user initially receives a Friend request, Facebook also notifies them of 'mutual Friends'. Contacting these mutual Friends for information or 'context' (Donath and boyd 2004) on the user sending the Friend request is an important friending strategy. Presumably picking up on the popularity of this feature on Facebook, MySpace has also begun signalling 'common friends' to facilitate the friending process.

While Julie simply deletes requests from individuals she neither recognises nor shares any mutual Friends with (randoms), Dora described a more active strategy. Dora is a 24-year-old Malaysian-Indian student studying theatre in Australia. She has close to 700 Friends on Facebook, but had never met 50-60 of them in-person, which was uncommonly high compared to the other participants in the study. Dora explained that instead of simply denying Friend requests from randoms, she liked to initiate contact through private messages to 'find out about them' and come to an understanding of 'who they are'. This particular approach allows Dora to determine 'legitimate' potential Friends:

Like one person wanted to study at [University], and they found me on the [University] Community on Facebook and they want to speak Indian-to-Indian, so they added me then they say “Oh I’m going to [University] next semester, can you tell me about it?” So that way I’m totally “alright”, and at the end of the day I can meet up with that person... it should be fun.

(Dora, 24)

While Dora might appear to have a relatively open approach in her friending practices, compared to Julie (22) or Jamie (27), it’s important to note the effort Dora goes to in actually contacting would-be Friends to find out more about them. The implication that Dora plans to meet with these 50 or 60 Facebook Friends at some point – mainly through the University Community – also problematises a reading of her practices as lacking a sense of practical control or being unconcerned about privacy (Gross and Acquisti 2005).

Real Life, Real Friends: High Levels of Practical Control

Eric, (20) saw Facebook as ‘documenting real life’ rather than as a tool to be used to meet new people, and so his friending strategies mirrored that approach. Of the 500 or so Friends Eric had on Facebook, there were only five he had not met before and a further 25 to 50 he had only met once or twice. Tim (18) also prefers to keep his MySpace page just for friends he knows offline, but has also been open to meeting new people online, contingent on the potential for an offline meeting. Similar to Dora, when Tim is added by randoms he would first initiate contact with them by way of private messages to determine whether or not he would like to add them as Friends and eventually meet them offline. Tim appeared to engage in this practice less frequently however, and was more inclined than Dora to reject people he couldn’t foresee meeting in-person.

Adam’s (16) friending strategy was similar to Tim’s. Adam is in year ten at high school, and also works on the weekends at an ice cream shop. He loves to

surf, and uses his MySpace profile to share surfing photos with his friends. While Adam generally only accepted people he 'knew' offline, he confessed to a slight bias when determining whether or not to add randoms on MySpace, explaining that 'hot girls' were more likely to get the green light. Again, Adam's honesty here demonstrates the messy exceptions to friending strategies that disrupt any attempt to organise friending practices into a neat spectrum with high levels of practical control at one end, and low levels of practical control at the other. Despite having an approach to friending that he generally stuck to (only friending people he knew offline, or 'real friends'), Adam's strategy was derailed when an attractive girl entered into the equation.

When discussing the presence of commercial entities on social network sites, responses from participants were varied. Emma (20), for instance, used her MySpace page to advertise her alternative music podcast and thought that it was acceptable for people to advertise their own products or services on MySpace and to encourage Friends to do the same. Dora (24) reinforced this sentiment, reporting that she regularly promoted events and products her Friends sent her.

Julie (22), however, disliked the fact that for a university course she was required to join a Facebook group. Despite being an active Facebook user, she did not want to mix her formal studies with the social dimensions of Facebook:

Julie: My tutor made the group and we have to, like, post discussion topics for our class. And then the amount of interaction we have on that counts towards our marks at the end of the year.

Int.: What do you think about that kind of requirement?

Julie: I thought it was absolute bullshit to be honest that he did that because a lot of people didn't have Facebook and we've got a lot of middle-aged people in our group that didn't want to use it and we said that *Facebook is something that's... social... it shouldn't*

necessarily bring in the whole study thing. That's what we have Blackboard for, so why aren't we using that... And he's just like, 'No we're doing it this way' and I was like 'Pfft.' If I didn't have Facebook I would've been even more... I know a lot of people weren't happy.

Int.: So did a lot of people that didn't have it [Facebook] get it to do the course?

Julie: Yeah well because it was 20 per cent of our marks - participation - that was part of it so... yeah... *I think people use Facebook to be social; they use it to get away from work and all that sort of thing. I don't know if that's why a lot of people use it but I know for me it annoyed me that uni was having a part of it.* I didn't want to do it. But I did, because I didn't want to fail.

This is a useful example of what Julie has essentially described here as a breach of boundaries between her studies and her social life, which she prefers to keep separate. This is also an excellent example of an entity (a university in this instance, but with easily made parallels in the commercial sector) seeking to 'harness' social media to improve engagement. What isn't taken into consideration here is the contextual nature of the space, and the possibility that some students are highly resistant to involving the institution in what they perceive and frame as a private, personal, social space. Julie interprets this requirement from the university that she use Facebook as part of her participation in a course as a threat to her high levels of practical control. She is also explicit about what she believes Facebook is for, and that doesn't include study.

Friendship Hierarchies, Network Sizes and the Friendship Cull

In his study on the personal networks of friends, neighbours, relatives and co-workers, Wellman (1999) observed that for any given individual, a typical network included 3 to 6 very close, intimate ties (related to the concept of 'close friend capital', developed in Chapter 4), 5 to 15 less close but still significant and active ties, and approximately 1000 more distant acquaintances. These

more distant ties were not necessarily 'latent' (Haythornthwaite 2002) but people on the periphery of the network. The participants in this study conceptualised their online social networks in a similar fashion. When asked to describe the different kinds of Friends he had connected to his profile (with a preference for MySpace although 'out of necessity' he had also started using Facebook), Shannon (23) explained that his Friends could be separated into different 'tiers':

...like 'Tier 1' who I'd see often in real life or talk to on the phone often or even semi-regularly. Then there's 'Tier 2' people who... I'd see maybe once every few weeks. Then there's the dregs.

(Shannon 23)

Although his response was probably tinged with sarcasm and humour, the 'dregs' of Shannon's network are actually consistent with how other participants have also described their own extended networks of Friends. Instead, I would refer to these Friends as 'peripheral'. While they don't maintain regular or frequent contact with them, they make up the vast majority of many participants' networks. Although not hierarchical, Alison (19) also had a clear conceptualisation of different groups of Friends:

Alison: Well there's kind of like two little bubbles. There's the Gold Coast bubble and then there's the [hometown] bubble, but there's probably like three people who overlap. In the home bubble, you're kinda talking about past stuff and old in-jokes, and the other bubble is... I don't know, new stuff.

Int.: And are there people on your Facebook from outside those two bubbles as well?

Alison: Mostly those people. But there are also people from like Sydney who I meet... or the girls from work... random people you meet out in Surfers. They're usually all connected. Like you might meet someone from Brisbane that turns out to be [boyfriend's] friend or something.

Alison generally only accepted Friend requests from or initiated Friend requests with people she had met in-person. Thus, the place-based mapping she does here in relation to her network makes good sense. Her online social interactions are thus heavily anchored to her offline interactions. Alison conceded that although she could potentially see many of her Friends in the Gold Coast bubble on any given weekend, the group of people who she deliberately sought to spend time with was fairly small.

Julie (22) has nearly 400 Friends, but regularly maintains contact with as few as five or even two of those Friends. Carl (24) has only 60 Friends on Facebook because he wanted to be as restrictive as possible as he saw socialising online as time-consuming. Camilla (24) has around 160 Friends, but didn't have regular contact with about 80 per cent of them. Sharon (17) has approximately 380 Friends on Facebook, but considered only 15 to 20 of them 'close'.

What is the value of maintaining a network that consists largely of, in Shannon's terms, 'dregs'? A common response to my questions about why these periphery contacts are kept was that de-friending someone could be seen as a serious affront. Just as David's (23) practice of not friending 'dickheads' can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture, so too can the act of deleting a social tie be interpreted as deeply significant: an affront, a comment on the value of a friendship, an insult to be taken personally. Various participants explained that deleting the Friends they rarely had contact with could potentially be quite awkward if that person noticed. One participant described how she took the risk and curtailed the 'long tail' of her network through a 'Friendship cull'.

Charlotte (19) had about 450 Friends on Facebook before reducing her network to just 118 contacts in what she described as a Friendship cull. After

using Facebook for several years, Charlotte had accrued a relatively large network of Friends, many peripheral or belonging to Wellman's (1999) distant category or Shannon's 'dregs'. She saw this as a gap in her privacy strategy, and no longer wanted these contacts to have open access to her profile. Charlotte's Friendship cull is a good example of how friending strategies can change over time, and how users can re-think their friending strategies to increase (or potentially decrease) the extent to which they exert a sense of practical control over their social network sites. Charlotte did admit to some reservations in proceeding with the Friendship cull, and explained that she had certain Friends who she would not delete because of the potential drama that may ensue:

A lot of friends since hearing that I've done it are like 'that's actually a really good idea and I'd like to do the same'. But it's funny because there are some people on there that we just won't delete because *we know that they'll get really shitty and it's just not worth the shit fight*. Even though we don't talk and we don't really like the person we keep them on there because you're like 'Hi! It'll help you sleep at night apparently'.

(Charlotte 19)

Charlotte signals here her derision of those who invest too heavily in the symbol of the social tie on a social network site. She mocks the Friend who would take offence at the prospect of being deleted, even in a broader Friendship cull that was presumably not directed at anyone in particular, but was instead a strategy for (re)asserting a sense of practical control over the profile. Later in the interview, Charlotte goes on to consider why certain Friends might react negatively to being deleted in a cull, and the follow-on implications for her own everyday use of Facebook:

I think a lot of people it makes them feel good to see the Friend count, and if that's what makes them feel happy, if that's what validates them - great. Sure. It doesn't do anything for me but sure. Um, the only thing I do miss is that now my news feed – there's not so much going on! [There are] still people to stalk, I just have to go through alternate routes to get there. Yeah.

(Charlotte 19)

Again, Charlotte's tone is a mocking one, as she asserts that large numbers of Friends are interpreted by some of her presumably superficial Friends, as 'validating'. In other words, Charlotte is critical of those who find validation in large Friend lists. The implication here is that not only is a large number of Friends not important, but it can also be read as undesirable, as inauthentic.

Thus, the Friendship cull can be interpreted as an effective and yet problematic mechanism by which control can be (re)asserted over the profile. It is problematic given its potential for damaging one's reputation, for having a deleterious impact on social ties, and also for producing potentially awkward in-person encounters where a deleted Friend may confront the 'culler'. Importantly, this strategy of control also serves as a useful example to advance understandings of the symbolic importance of the social tie, the Friendship, as articulated (if tenuously) on social network sites.

Chapter Conclusion

The practice of friending on social network sites can be awkward and messy. As David (23) explained, even though he chose to friend almost anybody, the situations where he chose not to friend someone produced subsequent encounters with those individuals that were awkward and uncomfortable. Being 'deleted' as a Friend, or having a Friend request 'denied' can be upsetting. While perhaps not as traumatic as the termination of traditional (small f)

friendships discussed by Benenson and Christakos (2003), the deletion represents a severing of a social tie and is potentially upsetting just the same. The conflict appears to arise when people's strategies for friending do not match up. As this is a relatively new medium of sociality that has become so popular so quickly, the social conventions that govern these spaces are still developing. The array of practices I've begun to outline in this chapter work to represent this. Adding Friends to specially created, sub-set Friends lists to establish multiple levels of privacy and conducting Friendship culls to trim social networks are both clear examples of emerging trends in the highly strategic management of privacy on social network sites. It is critical that this kind of complexity is incorporated into conceptualisations of social network sites.

I would argue that while models such as those developed by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) and the glass bedroom metaphor advanced by Pearson (2009) do retain some currency, they require ongoing revision. Indeed, although they did not intend their model to be applied to social network sites, I would argue that Hodkinson and Lincoln's model, particularly in terms of the practical and symbolic control exerted in these spaces, can and should be applied to the profiles of social network sites with some revision as I have done in this chapter. Perhaps the central flaw in applying any kind of bedroom metaphor to a social network site would be the aforementioned issue of intimacy. The online journals described by Hodkinson and Lincoln were intimate places of personal exchange and sharing, whereas some profiles on social network sites lack this sense of intimacy. A discrepancy in the intimacy found between profiles stems from the fact that different individuals are developing substantially different friending practices. Thus, it is futile for singular models of online privacy to be advanced, or for one-dimensional conceptualisations of online social spaces to exist. For

bedroom metaphors to be afforded any rigorous sense of legitimacy, they must attempt to account for the vast complexity being observed in privacy settings and friending practices between and within social network sites. It is also clear that, consistent with research being done on young users of social network sites globally, young people are not using social network sites to meet new people. Rather, they are primarily being used to articulate and develop existing social relationships. While there does exist the potential for *networking* and meeting new people on these sites (turning randoms into friends) it is not their central purpose. Instead, interaction with randoms in these predominantly private spaces are uncommon.

Based on my findings, no clear generalisations can be made about whether users of social network sites rely more heavily on internalised 'feelings' about friendship or the extent to which structural factors – gender, class, markers of 'sameness' – have an impact on friending practices. Rather, the process appears to be specific to the individual's perceived motivation for participating on a social network site. The average individual who is seeking to use these sites to maintain contact with existing friends, for instance, is likely to decline unsolicited Friend requests from randoms. However, motivation and the extent of participation is a dynamic process that is open to change and variation. As with Shannon's (23) 'tiered' approach to his Friends, that aligns neatly with Wellman's (1999) conceptualisation of networks, there are some categories of Friends on social network sites (the 'dregs', for instance) who would not be considered friends at all from a more traditional perspective.

Contrary to discourses that construct young users of social network sites as diluting notions of friendship and being blasé with privacy, the participants in this study demonstrated a strong sense of agency in the way they managed

their online social spaces in both symbolic and practical capacities, consistent with the findings of Patchin and Hinduja (2010). While there are certainly users on MySpace and Facebook whose practices differ from those in this study and who reinforce the aforementioned discourses, it would be my contention that, increasingly, they are in the minority.

Whether social network sites continue to be one of the dominant forms of online social interaction remains to be seen. However, the enormous impact of these sites on the social lives of their users is clear. In the following chapter, I explore the reality that the young people in this study are amongst the first of a generation to be growing up in an environment where online social interaction is increasingly mandatory for participation in peer networks. The implications of having transition stories articulated, made visible, and archived in these spaces requires a critical discussion that leads on from the conversation about Friendship and control in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Growing Up on Social Network Sites

I used to [use MySpace more], because I had more friends on it. Then everyone went to Facebook. So I moved to Facebook.

(Adam, 16)

[Facebook] does have more of a buzz. It feels like there is stuff happening all of the time. And even though I'm not interested in that stuff, it's kind of addictive in a way... people post all these sort of vague, ambiguous statements about their life and I'm like "alright I'll buy it!"

(Shannon, 23)

In reflecting upon the 'trace', made when individuals use and thus produce the internet, Bowker (2007) makes the observation that his friends and acquaintances who died before 1992 are sparsely represented online. In 1992, the first widely adopted web browser Mosaic made the internet accessible for ordinary people in an everyday context. Bowker goes on to explain that his friends who died more recently 'carry on a rich afterlife ... [they] still receive email messages; links to their website rot very slowly; their informal thoughts are often captured on list-serv archives, on comments they have left on a website' (2007: 23). Bowker goes on to argue that the rise of the internet has brought about a 'new regime of memory practices' (2007: 34), signalling new configurations of knowledge/power. What are the implications of this new 'paradigm of the trace' for young people whose social lives are mediated online?

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the first implication is that the reach of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook has extended to a point where for many young people, participation is now mandatory for active inclusion amongst peer groups, and a necessary part of staying 'in the loop' not

only with broad networks of 'weak tie' peers but also, 'close tie' family and friends. The second key implication here is that for some of these young people, large parts of their social lives have been played out on these sites. As discussed in Chapter 3, the contents that constitute these social network sites (images, status updates, comments, likes, videos, notes, inbox messages, and so on) are persistent by default (boyd 2011: 46). Photos and wall posts, for instance, may slide into relative obscurity, but can be found by way of what Dubrofsky (2011: 123) describes as 'the unwieldy process of scrolling back'. That is, 'scrolling back' through someone's timeline or wall to find old posts. In other words, especially on Facebook but also to a somewhat lesser extent on MySpace, newer information is privileged. Older content and exchanges can be retrieved, but there is some negligible effort involved.

The third implication of the 'paradigm of the trace' for this chapter is the differences in the ways digital traces operate, are made visible, and subsequently managed between the two sites with which this research is concerned. I argue here that the shift from MySpace to Facebook can be understood as marking an important change in the way young people manage their 'digital trace', corresponding with narratives in which participants signal their movement towards forms of online sociality that are concerned with their relationships with others on Facebook rather than the often introspective, performative and aesthetic forms of sociality emphasised on MySpace.

In attending to these implications, I have divided this chapter into three parts. In part one, I will develop my argument around the notion of profiles on social network sites as 'transition texts' that can help youth researchers better understand emerging youth cultures and the experiences of transition young people articulate and make visible in these spaces. In part two, I document the

2008 shift in engagement amongst young people in Australia from the once popular social network site MySpace to the now dominant site, Facebook. I will describe this shift from one site to another as related to 'growing up' stories or stories of transition for the young people in the qualitative study reported upon here, conducted from 2007 to 2010. In part three, I highlight the language and descriptions my participants use to frame this shift from MySpace to Facebook, and to describe the different practices that generate different forms of the 'digital trace' in these spaces.

Thus, this chapter builds on previous chapters that have demonstrated the various mechanisms of practical control young people in this study have exerted over their presence on social network sites in previous chapters, to conceptualise this control as being linked to a sense of the digital trace and its implications for young people. It is my central argument in this chapter that learning to manage this trace in online social spaces is an important concern for the young people in this study; a concern that is related to stories of 'growing up', transition, reflexive identity-work and the unique social conventions and affordances of different online social spaces.

Profiles as Transition Texts

As both spaces in and sites upon which everyday interactions are articulated, made visible, reflexively critiqued and subsequently managed, in both symbolic terms as described in Chapter 4, and in practical terms as discussed in Chapter 5, social network sites offer a new lens for insight into human behaviour. In describing profiles on social network sites as 'texts', I refer again here to Wakeford's conceptualisation of websites as 'simultaneously computer code,

cultural representations and the outcome of skilled labour [... they are] complex artefacts that can be written, read, used or consumed' (2004: 35).

Livingstone observes that the broad adoption of social network sites, especially amongst that 'vanguard' of young people, has meant that 'more than ever before, using media means *creating* as well as receiving' (2008: 394, emphasis added). Under this model of content production, social network sites, described by Bruns as spaces for the 'produsage of sociality' (Bruns 2008: 316), provide not only spaces in which transitional experiences are played out, but they also act as archives of these mediated experiences-as-texts. These texts – the profiles that constitute social network sites – work to represent those transitional experiences: photos of birthdays, discussions concerning relationships and current affairs, and articulations of the relationships and systems of belonging that constitute young people's narratives of transition.

My participants are concerned more about the implications of their own trace – profiles created, comments left, pictures uploaded – in relation to the questions from previous chapters relating to integrity, privacy and friendship (or Friendship) and what it means to be them, rather than about who will be googling them after they're gone. And yet, the possibilities raised by Bowker (2007) are rendered increasingly resonant by the extent to which young people's narratives and experiences of 'growing up' are now mediated and played out online, and subsequently scrutinised. This introduces the possibility of an unintended dimension to participation in these spaces that, while aligning with Zuckerberg's philosophy of transparency, also (perhaps generatively) provides young people with an archived 'timeline' of reflexive thinking, of critical moments, and of transition experiences.

Researching Identity 'In Process'

McLeod (2000) points out that the 'in process' nature of identity – especially for young people – makes studying identity particularly difficult. McLeod suggests that longitudinal research provides scholars with the most 'substantial body of evidence for interpreting processes of identity formation and identity practices' (2000: 49). She invokes the metaphor of 'the self as a magic writing pad', that consists of two layers: 'a soft wax slate and over it a thin, transparent leaf of paper [...that] all the time receives new inscriptions upon it without having the old ones erased' (Bjerrum Nielsen in McLeod 2000: 51). McLeod goes on to argue that this metaphor is a useful way of thinking about the formation of identity, especially for longitudinal researchers, who are more interested in that deeper understanding of identity as long-term project. Could research on social network sites address some of the methodological concerns raised here by McLeod?

Conceptualising the profiles that constitute social network sites as transition texts, as manifestations of Giddens' (1993) 'reflexive project of self' (as explored in Chapter 2), gives researchers a rich terrain of content to explore. There are clear methodological and ethical limitations, especially around consent and access to these spaces and reliance on self-reports of transition experiences, which I have explored in detail in Chapter 3. From a broader sociological perspective, however, these sites serve as a valuable resource in better understanding reflexive identity work and youth culture more broadly, possibly providing an alternative to the longitudinal work discussed by McLeod (2000). Rather than being conceptualised as a valuable insight into youth culture, however, these profiles are more commonly framed as incriminating records of a misspent youth.

Hiding Hijinks

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, the then CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, suggested that eventually young people will want to change their names upon reaching 'adulthood', 'in order to disown youthful hijinks stored on their friends' social media sites' (Jenkins 2010). The implication here is that all young people are engaging in these online 'hijinks', and that 'youthful hijinks' are things to be hidden or even erased. It is also implied that young people are incapable of managing this trace, a sentiment that the voices of my participants in the previous chapter worked to counter.

Schmidt's line about youthful hijinks online – and the need to erase them – is part of a much broader and more deeply-embedded concern about the notion of a digital trace, a concern which is often directed at young people's use of social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. Cohen (1972: 118) demonstrated in his work around the media representation of the mods and rockers in 1960s Britain that the amplification of deviant youth practices can generate moral panics that frame young people negatively. In the context of social network sites, Schmidt's comments are part of what Cohen would describe as the 'amplification' of negative practices. While journalists may have the dubious 'bad news sells' excuse (Clark, Ghosh, Green & Shariff 2008: 17), the CEO of Google has a greater responsibility in the circulation of these kinds of discourses that falsely frame young people's online social practices as necessarily negative.

As Clark et al. (2008) demonstrate, the media discourses that frame young people negatively (often in relation to gang crime, carrying knives, consuming drugs and alcohol and so on for Clark et al., but here in relation to the recording of 'youthful hijinks' on social network sites) can also have a negative impact on

young people's perceptions of self. In this sense, these negative discourses can be written back onto the practices of young people, who as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, describe themselves, tongue-in-cheek, as 'addicted' to social network sites and 'stalking' their Friends when they visit each other's profiles. While these descriptions may appear harmless, they gain currency as they are circulated in the broader discourse surrounding social network sites, and even as they are written into academic literature by the likes of O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) who un-critically and without evidence argue for the existence of 'Facebook addiction'.

Transition Experiences as Punctuated by Critical Moments

As I have begun to argue earlier in this thesis, as a categorical or developmental 'stage', the concept of youth is largely untenable. The boundaries that appear to separate childhood, youth and adulthood are 'blurred, indistinct, porous and changing' (Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011: 361). Instead, understanding youth as a '*social process*' (Wyn & White: 1997: 147, italics original) provides a much more viable lens through which young people's transition narratives can be understood. As Wyn and White (1997: 95) argue, there is often no 'definite point of arrival' in transition narratives.

The process of 'becoming adult' is highly contested, multiple, non-linear, and varied, wrought by social and geographical positions. This process of transition is punctuated and shaped by 'critical moments' (Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis & Sharpe 2002) such as moving out of home, dropping out of school, entering a relationship, learning to drive, a death in the family, going clubbing for the first time, and so on. In Giddens' terms, the 'fateful moment' (from which Thomson et al. borrow in conceptualising the critical moment), is 'highly consequential for a person's destiny' (1991: 121), and

should be understood as distinct from but certainly affecting the inconsequential goings-on of daily life. When these critical moments are articulated and made visible on social network sites, and then subsequently archived by way of the persistent nature of these spaces, they become key markers in a mediated growing up story for young people.

Livingstone (2002: 4) points towards the central role of new media for young people who are 'motivated to construct identities, to forge new social groupings, and to negotiate alternatives to given cultural meanings'. Sharing, discussing, and remembering these critical moments becomes an important activity on social network sites, punctuating – as with offline experiences of growing up – the more mundane, everyday experiences of life that often attract criticism and derision when mediated online²⁵.

Broad Participation

As adoption and engagement with social network sites continues, participation has not only enhanced the potential for improved sociability and inclusion, but engagement has for some become mandatory. As Alison (19) explains, '[without Facebook] you wouldn't know what's going on with people... you'd forget about them'. This extract from my interview with Alison is reminiscent of the phrase often cited as contributing to earlier moral panics around MySpace: 'if you're not on MySpace, you don't exist' (Participant Skyler, 18, in boyd 2008a: 119).

These sentiments characterise a period in which some young people have been engaging with social network sites for a large part of their social lives, effectively 'growing up' on social network sites. Or, rather, their experiences of growing up – regardless of whether they are mediated online or offline – are often recorded

²⁵ See, for instance, journalistic accounts of Facebook being a place for 'boring... social recluses' to 'spam others' (Mathews 2012).

online, through social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, by way of the digital trace. How do these spaces hold up as their user base grows up? Or indeed, how do they fail to retain users? What might compel young people to move from one social network site to another as they transition towards adulthood?

For the remainder of this chapter, I seek to draw out the complexity inherent in social interaction on sites like MySpace and Facebook as spaces of transition and reflexivity. While the social conventions that govern these sites differ, the extent to which they make visible and archive transitional experiences – both fateful/critical and inconsequential/mundane – are key. It is my contention that these sites serve as spaces in which young people are able to undertake and articulate not only a social experience of transition with others, but also with themselves; ‘a self-conscious conversation of self with self’ (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe & Thomson 2007: 24).

Leaving MySpace, Joining Facebook: Functionality and Mass

Before I can properly discuss the discourses of transition that are enabled by and played out on these sites, a more rudimentary discussion of the motivations for engaging with one site over another, and a brief history of the move from MySpace to Facebook is necessary.

In 2008, a shift in usage occurred amongst young Australian users of social network sites (Young 2009: 40). This shift was between the once popular MySpace towards the now dominant Facebook. By June in 2008, MySpace had clearly lost its ground to Facebook in terms of its Australian audience, such that by August, Facebook was the fourth most popular online destination in Australia, with MySpace at seventh (Hitwise.com 2008). At this point, the

combined reach of these sites accounted for 4.2 per cent of all Australian internet traffic. This shift was by no means overnight, nor was it unique to Australia. Elsewhere, such as in the U.S., the shift from MySpace to Facebook was more gradual and occurred slightly later, in the first half of 2009 (Quantcast.com 2010). In late 2010, MySpace continued to be a somewhat popular social network site in places such as the U.S. and Mexico, appearing in the top twenty websites for these countries, but had fallen into relative obscurity for mainstream Australian users at position forty-seven (Alexa.com 2010). At the time of writing in early 2012, MySpace had fallen out of the top 100 websites in all countries. In terms of user-base, MySpace moved from a global reach of 6 per cent of all internet users in late 2009, down to 2 per cent in late 2010, to below 1 per cent in 2011. Facebook's global reach, on the other hand, went from 11 per cent in late 2009 to 38 per cent in late 2010, and was steady at 43 per cent in early 2012 (Alexa.com 2012). In Australia, Facebook alone now accounts for 8.02 per cent of all national internet traffic (Hitwise.com 2012).

Interviewees reported a variety of differences between the sites. In the 2007 pilot study that preceded the doctoral research focussed upon here, Facebook was not mentioned by any of the ten participants, as it had not been widely adopted in Australia at this point. In the 2009/2010 doctoral fieldwork, in line with the quantitative shift described above, Facebook was described by each participant in ascendant terms, and was clearly the most popular site amongst this second group. Only seven of the thirty-three participants in the doctoral research identified predominantly as MySpace users, although even amongst these participants, adopting Facebook was described as inevitable. That is, they would eventually 'have' to use Facebook more to stay in touch with their friends (or, in one case, family). Shannon (23), Tim (18), Jonas (17), Adam (16), Kath

(16), Silvia (15) and Simon (15), identified themselves as predominantly using MySpace although each of them also had a Facebook profile, motivated by a desire to avoid 'losing touch' with friends or to keep from being left 'out of the loop'. Jonas, Kath, and Silvia described a more imminent shift to Facebook, whereas Shannon, Tim, Adam and Simon were more reluctant about the move, but still expected to be using Facebook more than MySpace in the future.

Emma (20) reported using both sites equally but for slightly different purposes. She used her MySpace profile to catalogue and promote her indie music podcast but preferred Facebook to remain in touch with 'real friends'. Other participants also mentioned music as a recurring motivation for continuing to use MySpace (as its original success came from early adoption by bands), while primarily using Facebook for social communication. Despite the broader shift to Facebook, then, MySpace still retained the functionality of a site where bands and artists could share music, upcoming tour dates, and other news. None of the participants in the 2009/2010 group who had used MySpace previously reported officially closing or deleting their MySpace profiles, despite not having used the service for months or even years.

The shift from MySpace to Facebook reported by the participants in this study can be attributed to two broad dimensions: functionality and critical mass. There are a variety of dimensions which may contribute to leaving one site for another, or opting out of profile based social network sites more generally (although the latter was not reported by any participants in this study) but these broad factors represent the most commonly reported motivations of movement. These two dimensions – functionality and critical mass – also inform and reinforce each other. For example, a site becomes more functional (or its functions gain currency) when more of an individual's peer group use it, thus enabling and

encouraging the user to continue to engage with the site. Similarly, as a site's functionality improves (or when a set of functions appear to be more appealing), a greater user base is attracted to the site.

Functionality

The design of a site, or the way a site functioned, understandably emerged as a common theme when participants were asked about motivations for using one site over another. Tim, for example, an 18 year-old born in Sydney who had recently moved to the Gold Coast to study, had tried out Facebook but was deterred by its functionality:

I actually hate how Facebook has got all those little annoying group invitations and things and it's just too much going on... *pointless information*. Like people just going 'oh, I'm hungry' and posting that. MySpace is a bit more like... *to the point*.

(Tim, 18)

In other words, Facebook's functionality invites users to articulate the more mundane, inconsequential goings-on of everyday life, whereas MySpace was more highly curated. Debra (21), who used Facebook more than MySpace but still maintained her MySpace profile, also commented on the more precise, 'to the point' nature of MySpace. Comparing MySpace with Facebook, she explains that 'MySpace is a lot more... "this is who I am". It's a lot more your own side'. Both Tim and Debra are pointing to a clear difference between the two sites, which I also explored briefly in Chapter 4. MySpace is focussed more on the user's self-narrative as constructed through images and autobiographical text. The form and function of MySpace in this context is reminiscent of the homepage theorised in earlier internet studies literature. Cheung (2004) describes the personal homepage as being both performative (*'this is me!*' in Cheung's words, strikingly similar to Debra's words above) and reflexive (*'who*

am I?'). The main social elements of the MySpace profile such as comments and the 'top friends' feature operate alongside a narrative of performative reflexivity. Facebook, on the other hand, has the social element – the dynamic social news feed – at the core of its functionality, whereas the autobiographical detail, including lists of favourite bands, books and television shows are often forgotten.

As discussed in previous chapters, while all participants reported completing autobiographical about me sections initially, the extent to which these were maintained varied. Lynne (24), for instance, updated her profile picture multiple times each day to reflect her mood. Melissa (20), on the other hand, explains that although she uses Facebook daily and sees it as an important social utility, she has not updated her core profile information since creating the account several years prior. Similarly, Julie (22), Catherine (20), Naomi (19), and David (23) reported regularly making status updates, posting content to their own pages and commenting on content from Friends, but left the more core autobiographical information unchanged (or blank) since initially signing up. Each of these participants could not recall basic autobiographical information on their Facebook profiles without a prompt, but could recall a recent status update without difficulty.

While social interactions on Facebook have previously been described largely as asynchronous (Hull, Lipford & Latulipe 2010: 6-11; Quan-Haase & Young 2010: 358), participants in this study have described their social interactions on Facebook as often synchronous or 'real-time' at certain times during the day. Julie (22), Brad (20), Bree (20), Charlotte (19), and Kath (16), for instance, each

described the afternoons and evenings as a time where many of their Friends would be active on Facebook²⁶.

Charlotte specifically mentioned that she would tend to spend more time on Facebook between 4PM and 9PM, interacting with friends via IM (Instant Messenger) or comment threads (on status updates, pictures, or other posts). Outside these times, Charlotte explained that 'usually people aren't on then, so I don't go on then'. Brad described synchronous chats that would last between thirty minutes and two hours in the evenings. Bree, the 20-year-old Arts student who also works as a fitness instructor on the Gold Coast, also mentioned a concentration of Facebook use in the evenings, and went on to make a distinction between who she prefers to interact with synchronously, and who she prefers to interact with asynchronously:

Bree: It's usually at night. I like to do my study and stuff during the day because I can't really do that stuff at night, so I like to do my own thing at night and that's when I go on Facebook.

Int.: Aside from your schedule, do you also have a sense that other people seem to do that at night as well?

Bree: Yeah that's when I talk to all my friends and stuff.

Int.: And when you say talk, do you... is it commenting or using IM?

Bree: Depends on who it is. If it's closer friends I'm talking to them on Instant Messenger, if it's just people I'm associated with who I'm like checking up on – well, not checking up on – getting in contact with again, it's just a comment.

Bree's preference to communicate synchronously only with 'close' friends (via IM) effectively maps on to my arguments about Friendship hierarchies in Chapter 5. When I ask Bree whether she has set up a filter system so that only

²⁶ This corresponds with research that indicates afternoons are often free of imposed time structures for young people (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter 2003).

people she designates as 'close' can see her listed as 'online' in Facebook chat/IM, she laughs and admits that she isn't familiar with that function: 'I don't know that much about Facebook. I don't know how to do that.' As with David's (23) assertion that he doesn't 'really know' how Facebook works, I get the impression that Bree's admission, while potentially very true, also serves to signal her lack of investment in Facebook to me. Bree explains that rather than emerging from a technical process of controlling who can and cannot see her on Facebook's IM, her desire to only communicate with close friends synchronously at night emerges from her practice of initiating and terminating synchronous interaction with certain people. In other words, any of Bree's Facebook Friends can see her as 'available' or 'online', but she only carries on real-time conversations with certain contacts.

While the concentration of activity in the afternoons and evenings can be linked to greater levels of time unstructured by school and work commitments, it is also important to note that this was not ubiquitous. My participants juggled university timetables that sometimes had them in class into the early evening, casual/part-time/full-time work commitments sometimes working night shifts at bars or in retail, carer responsibilities, and so on.

Although several participants such as Charlotte and Brad described the value of synchronous interactions on Facebook, others, such as Camilla (24), specifically mentioned that she disabled Facebook's IM function (set herself to always be 'offline' or 'unavailable', and thus invisible to others) as she found synchronous interaction 'annoying' and potentially disruptive.

While MySpace and Facebook both offer synchronous and asynchronous functionality (boyd 2008: 44), it is clear that the kinds of interaction occurring on

MySpace tend towards the asynchronous forms, whereas Facebook's functionality and the conventions that shape interaction on Facebook, allows for a greater level of synchronous interaction (see also Hogan 2010 and Latzko-Toth 2010). Thus, it is clear that the manifestation of the 'digital trace' differs between sites, based on temporality, functional affordances, and conventions of usage in each space.

In summary, MySpace's functionality is built around the user's self-narrative, which appears to be predominantly introspective, whereas Facebook's core functionality works to generate an inherently social, and dynamic experience where users are often engaging with each other in real-time through IM and by participating in commentary threads on photographs, status updates and so on. These differences in functionality subsequently render these sites as spatially different, with MySpace being more closely aligned with Cheung's (2004) performative model of the personal homepage and Facebook tending more towards a synchronous (Fuchs 2009: 6) social space where biographical details are less important than regular interactions. These differences in functionality and the social conventions of the digital trace have important implications for the ways in which transitional experiences – whether critical or mundane – are mediated online.

Critical Mass

While comments on the functional differences between MySpace and Facebook were common when participants were asked about why they preferred or used one site over another, it quickly became apparent that there was a second motivation for adopting a social network site or moving to another: the presence of peers. Adam (16) explains it most clearly: 'I used to [use MySpace more], because I had more friends on it. Then everyone went to Facebook. So I moved

to Facebook'. While the way the site functions and subsequently the spatial experience it creates is an important part of the equation, Facebook's features are empty without a network with which to share and engage. It is, after all, the network that populates the user's news feed and comments on the user's activities. Simon (15) explains: 'I get more comments and stuff on MySpace and going onto Facebook and seeing nothing there is disappointing'. Given that users of both MySpace and Facebook connect with and friend mainly people they already know offline (boyd & Ellison 2008), without a critical mass of known contacts on a particular social network site, its functions have no utility.

To return to Tim (18), who initially explained that the easy-to-use functionality of MySpace is what kept him there, the full story became clearer as the interview progressed. When probed about his actual practices on MySpace, Tim explained that mainly he was just keeping in touch and up-to-date with friends and family from his hometown who he no longer saw frequently. Should they move to Facebook, he indicated that he would also be likely to make the move, despite his grievances with 'pointless information' people seemed to post on Facebook. Indeed, Tim had already begun to spend some time on Facebook to keep in touch with his family who didn't use MySpace, albeit with some resistance. He still saw himself as a dedicated MySpace user, because this was how his peer group in Sydney also identified.

Another common theme that emerged from the stories participants told about adopting MySpace or Facebook was that other people specifically encouraged them to sign-up. For some, friends or family actually created their profiles for them. Julie (22) explains that she began using Facebook after a friend of hers returned from Canada, where the site was used more widely, and convinced her to try it out. For Debra (21) it was her mother who initially encouraged her to

register with Facebook so they could 'stay in touch' more easily. For Tim (18) and Simon (15), the critical mass of their networks were still predominantly using MySpace and thus the motivation to leave MySpace and join Facebook was reduced.

Staying on MySpace to Avoid the Familial Gaze

Inconsistent with other research (Stringhini, Kruegel & Vigna 2010: 2; Livingstone, Ólafsson & Staksrud 2011: 3; boyd, 2011) and with the trend I identify above, seven of the participants in my research – five of whom were under 18 – still actively used MySpace well into 2010, contrary to this broader move towards Facebook. As I have described above in terms of the functionality of these sites, the participants in this study describe their own use of these sites through a discourse of transition. For example, of the seventeen participants in their 20s that had used MySpace previously, all but one variously discussed their activities on MySpace as being more 'youthful' or 'juvenile', while the younger participants still using MySpace describe an anticipation of the move to Facebook where they will be more 'grown up' – some more reluctantly than others.

What makes MySpace more 'youthful' or attractive to the younger people in this study? One possible explanation is that for seven participants of this study who still identified as MySpace users in 2010, MySpace was described as a place just for peers whereas Facebook was (increasingly) more likely to involve familial and other 'adult' relationships. Thus, MySpace continues to offer these young people a more peer-oriented online social space for the articulation of relationships and other systems of belonging, where the performative conventions were more introspective. As I will discuss in the next section, these motivations for a shift from one site to another are often reflexively linked to

stories of transition or 'growing up', as young people reflect upon the nature of these spaces.

Transition Narratives

While the shift from one site to another raises important questions about the differences between these sites and indeed motivating factors for such a movement, there are also broader implications and complexities underpinning the ways in which this shift is described by users of these sites. Specifically, the 'introspective', about me, and 'to the point' characteristics discussed above and in previous chapters that make MySpace different from Facebook can also be retrospectively framed as 'juvenile' (Charlotte, 19). Similarly, current MySpace users often refer to the inevitability of moving to Facebook, as it is framed as a more 'adult' (Simon, 15) space. It is my argument that this discursive framing of these sites is linked to their format and functionality. Where MySpace foregrounded features that allowed the profile creator to construct a clear narrative of identity, such as a performance of self through highly curated images (Sessions 2009) and autobiographical writing (Peeters 2007), Facebook's features are more clearly oriented towards actual dynamic, synchronous (Fuchs 2009: 6) social exchanges, as discussed above.

Simon (15), the youngest participant in the study, who reported checking his MySpace account on his smartphone every fifteen minutes or so during the day, was also the most specific in his understanding of the move from MySpace to Facebook as a 'rite of passage'. While he described himself as mainly a MySpace user, he also acknowledged that when he 'grew up' he would probably have to start using Facebook because, according to him, that's simply what you do. Other participants provided more nuanced narratives of transition

around engagement with social network sites. Dora (24), for example, started using MySpace when she was on a study exchange in America. While she still sometimes uses the site to maintain contact with her American friends, she predominantly used Facebook at the time of the interview. Dora consistently referred to her time on MySpace as an 'American phase'; a phase she went through and has now moved beyond after finishing her studies in America and moving on: 'MySpace is more an American thing. It's like I'm more in touch with my American friends [on MySpace]... So if you compare [them], Facebook is so much better because I'm in touch with everybody.'

Parents and Family

In the 2007 pilot, concerned only with MySpace, the theme of parental involvement in social network sites did not emerge. In the 2009/2010 doctoral research, however, the prospect of participants having to negotiate familial and other adult relationships on Facebook emerged more clearly. Sharon (17) started using MySpace when she was 14, but moved on to Facebook when she was 16. She had more Friends on MySpace, but Facebook allowed her to keep in touch with family too; an advantage that Sharon found herself appreciating more as she got older. Claire (25) specifically mentioned the importance of Facebook for staying in regular contact with her grandfather in New Zealand. Sharon's and Claire's experiences are consistent with findings in the longitudinal qualitative study by Henderson et al. who argue that young people develop an appreciation for home and the family as an 'emotional resource' (2007: 125) as they undergo the transition towards adulthood.

Not all participants were as positive as Sharon (17) and Claire (25) about the presence of family on social network sites. Charlotte (19), for example, described a sense of dread at the thought of her parents joining Facebook and

adding her as a Friend. While it hadn't happened to her yet, she had friends who had found themselves in such a situation and subsequently altered their strategies of 'impression management' (boyd 2006) or 'reputation management' (Madden & Smith 2010) by being more selective with the content they put on Facebook, and by untagging images or comments that didn't fit the impression they wanted to foster with their parents. Charlotte also felt a certain pressure to not tag her friends who had parents on Facebook in any photos that may be considered, in her terms, 'risqué'; mainly, photos involving drinking and partying. Charlotte's experience aligns more closely with the findings of West, Lewis and Currie (2009: 620) who found in their UK study of young Facebook users a great hesitancy to allow parents access to their profiles, primarily out a concern to maintain a parent-free, peer-online 'environment'.

While it is not my intention to necessarily frame an appreciation of or a desire to engage (or not to engage) with family or adults as a marker of transition for young people, I would argue that the presence of these sentiments in the context of social network sites does represent a shift in the conceptualisation of these spaces away from being uniquely for young people. This shift occurs primarily through, or at least is more pronounced on Facebook and thus, for the participants in this study, Facebook is rendered more 'adult' than MySpace.

As Mesch and Talmud (2010: 31) explain, the 'generational divide' between young people and older family members (parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and so on) has closed significantly since the early stages of what they term 'ICT domestication'. Similarly, Gregg (2011) describes the increasingly mundane or everyday nature of Facebook; a 'status' that MySpace didn't appear to achieve as it was adopted by a smaller and often younger demographic in Australia (Young 2009: 45). The timing of Facebook's

widespread adoption and the functionality of the site as discussed in the previous section has meant that Facebook's appeal is much wider than MySpace, and thus young people are forced to negotiate the presence of older family members on Facebook. The example of those five younger (15 to 17-year-old) participants who continued to engage with MySpace in 2010, despite its broader status as passé, demonstrates that this site continues to be valuable for some of these young people precisely because it is not frequented by older relatives and other adult figures in their lives. Its relative obscurity (compared to Facebook) makes it a social space free of the familial gaze where young people are free to engage with peers without parental supervision.

For one participant, Silvia (15), the ongoing shift to Facebook which was taking place at the time of the interview was motivated by a tragedy and a subsequent need to focus more on family rather than friends:

Int.: And what stopped you recently from using it [MySpace] 'religiously' like you said?

Silvia: I don't know things just changed. My dad passed away... I got my boyfriend and everything who I'm still with. And I sort of just became more family oriented. I moved on to Facebook where they all were. I don't live with most of my sisters.

Losing her father was obviously a critical moment for Silvia, and prompted a reordering of narratives and priorities. After the death of her father, and the subsequent focus on family and the intensification of her relationship with her boyfriend, Silvia's patterns of engagement with social network sites began to change. When Silvia described her patterns of MySpace use as 'religious', spending 'hours each day' on the site, she retrospectively reflected on this level of engagement as 'really childish' from her new perspective, aligning with Charlotte's (19) description of MySpace as 'juvenile'. At the time of the

interview, Silvia was only logging in to check MySpace a couple of times per week, increasingly preferring her newly created Facebook account that currently had around 60 Friends. She was using Facebook primarily to stay in touch with family.

Thomson (2007: 103) explains that bereavement can be 'an opportunity for reflection and growth' for young people, while also serving to draw the attention of the researcher towards 'how and why certain events are perceived as critical'. That the loss of Silvia's father prompted her to disinvest in MySpace and engage with family through Facebook is therefore significant. Her use of social network sites can be mapped on to a time of change and upheaval for Silvia, where her priorities shifted especially towards her boyfriend and her sisters.

Chapter Conclusion: Transition Traces

While leaving MySpace and joining Facebook may not in itself be as critical a transition as other rites of passage – such as coming out as gay, participating in a religious ceremony for the first time, leaving home, or losing a loved one – it is a transition in which young people do clearly invest. Adopting and moving between forms of online sociality, such as those offered by social network sites, is a complex process that the young people in this study are negotiating in strategic, nuanced, and often very different ways that contribute to reflexive biographies of transition to which scholarship in this area is only now beginning to attend.

The more important implication here is the observation that these sites are not only spaces in which young people can form and perform a sense of self and belonging through socialisation and communication, but they also act as spaces

of reflexivity where narratives of transition are performed, commented upon, recorded and archived: the digital trace of transition. Sometimes this trace manifests in a positive form, as when Brad (20) used Facebook to look for roommates, enabling him to move out of home or when Cody (21) was able to use Facebook to communicate with his boyfriend without what he felt was the financial burden of paying for phone calls and text messages. The trace can also manifest in potentially negative forms, such as the consternation articulated by Charlotte (19) over the thought of future employers finding photos of her posted by her friend in alcohol-fuelled, compromising scenarios (Brown & Gregg 2012). Or, as when Silvia (15) recalled losing her father, the changes in the manifestation of the digital trace – from the friend-oriented MySpace use to the family-oriented Facebook use – can signal crucial and tragic critical moments in a biography, and opportunities for personal reflection.

While it is the alcohol- or drug-related transitional experiences that often attract the most attention, framed as youthful 'hijinks' (Schmidt in Jenkins 2010) to be hidden or erased, all of these experiences contribute to the narrative of transition these sites make visible. Moving out of home, forming romantic relationships and entering into leisure practices involving alcohol can be framed as critical (Thomson et al. 2002) or fateful (Giddens 1991) moments that shape and punctuate young people's transition narratives. While the move from MySpace to Facebook may not represent a critical moment in itself, this transition does represent a shift in the way young people engage with and make visible their own transition narratives.

The transition stories that this study documents are complex and varied. Many of the stories uncovered in this research are not so much about 'growing up' as they are about troubling, complicating and reconfiguring that story: navigating

relationships, dealing with loss, finessing understandings of friendship, and discovering life paths. Understanding and framing youth as a process of transition, as a process of 'inventing adulthoods' (Henderson et al. 2007), which each participant understood and experienced differently, also meant leaving behind assumptions about which sites were 'in' and which sites were 'out'. It is clear that while there are visible trends in terms of reach and popularity for particular sites, qualitative investigations of the everyday experiences of young people that use these sites can make visible a series of interesting and still emerging practices and knowledges that counter these broader shifts.

In the following penultimate chapter, I draw many of the threads from the previous chapters together by arguing for a new approach to understanding youth cultures that are articulated and archived on social network sites. I argue for a 'systems of belonging' approach, that accounts for the variety of ways young people in late modernity experience, foster, and make visible belonging. This approach draws in various existing conceptualisations of youth culture and belonging, framing them as useful parts of a much bigger picture.

Chapter 7: Systems of Belonging

Belonging is central to identity. Narratives of self only work when they utilise elements that others can understand. As Hall (1996: 2) explains, identity is 'constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal'. The reflexive project of self-identity, then, which I have argued that social network sites make visible, is necessarily a project concerned with threading together belongings: from family and friends to religion and class and race and gender; from an intimate connection one shares with a lover, to a less-immediate but perhaps no-less-important affinity one shares with a kindred fan of one's favourite band or artist or film or novel or poem or television show. All of these belongings, whether tending towards the macro or the micro, constitute what I would describe as a dynamic 'system of belonging'. It is this notion of the system of belonging, and the various ways in which systems of belonging are mediated, made visible, played-out and archived online for young people, that this chapter addresses.

The embedded assumption in youth, whether framed either as a categorical life phase of development²⁷ or as a reflexive process of becoming, is that youth is concerned with working on the reflexive project of self: forming relationships, investing in education, stepping into employment, building capital, learning how to be in the world. Learning how to belong, and where they belong, was an important concern that emerged for the young people in this research project, as critical to the 'task' of youth. Talking about social network sites gave the young people at the centre of this project a means to make that point.

²⁷ A framing I would resist as simplistic, rigid and deterministic.

Mark (26) was my second-oldest participant. At the time of the interview, he was living on the Gold Coast temporarily – for a single year – while completing a Masters degree. Mark had travelled to Australia from Denmark, and reflected thoughtfully during our interview on the ways in which what he describes as ‘digital technologies’ helped him maintain a connection to family at home in Denmark:

Facebook and other digital technologies have really been a major factor in sustaining my relationships with people back home. Sometimes it's like... I've never been talking so much with my parents as I've done here!... Some of my relationships have been strengthened. A funny thing I noticed in a video conversation over skype, is that my girlfriend's baby sister and her husband and their kid - my girlfriend's nephew – [visited] us [in] Australia, and after a few months they went back to Denmark. Of course we got close to my girlfriends' nephew... he was only 2 years old, and [since he returned to Denmark] I'm just amazed that a 2-year-old can connect via video conversations and it's almost like he hasn't lost a sense of us at all? Like even though we're just moving images on a screen and a voice... I think that's just a good example of how strong that connection via these digital uh... platforms actually are. Even though we don't think about them? Even for a 2-year-old... I'm pretty sure when we get back home we'll just be the good play-uncle and play-aunty again.

(Mark, 26)

Mark's focus on family, and how those familial relationships are mediated and maintained online when physically separated by large distances, serves as a useful example of how belonging and affinity can play out online. Mark also comments here on how his girlfriend's nephew adjusted very quickly to interacting with his aunty and uncle online, and how this interaction became enmeshed in everyday life. There was nothing virtual or imaginary or fake about the interaction between Mark and his de facto nephew.

Beyond or perhaps alongside these familial ties which have featured in the previous two chapters, this doctoral project has also been concerned with the

value of existing, broader models of belonging in youth culture research. Are concepts like subculture useful for understanding contemporary, everyday experiences of belonging for young people? How might the kinds of configurations of belonging described by my participants be conceptualised by scholars of youth culture?

This chapter has three parts. First, I trace the postsubcultural turn in youth cultural studies, establishing the theoretical framework for the second part, where I consider this turn in relation to my own research on social network sites. Although I have outlined a broad, growing body of literature in this thesis examining the significance of social network sites for young people, little attempt has been made in the literature thus far to map the patterns of online engagement and interaction between young people with reference to the ongoing subculture/postsubculture debate in other areas of youth cultural studies. While online social spaces are often framed as exhibiting subcultural characteristics (especially around 'communities of affinity'), 'when subject to empirical scrutiny, a more postsubcultural, neo-tribal quality becomes evident in young people's everyday use and perception of social network sites' (Robards & Bennett 2011: 307). However, the neo-tribe, which operates in the literature as an alternative to subculture as a conceptual framework, also has its own limitations. Thus, in the third part of this chapter, I advance what I describe as a systems of belonging approach, providing an opening-up of perspectives in youth culture research, seeking to conceptualise the various ways in which young people articulate or come to be positioned within systems of belonging. Rather than existing in opposition, various accounts of belonging might be made to work together as components of a much broader understanding of youth culture.

Subculture to Postsubculture

Why subculture? What does a discussion of subculture bring to this thesis? The concept is a central one in research concerning youth culture, and it also circulates in popular, non-academic discourses around youth. Some internet researchers (Kahn & Kellner 2003; Papacharissi 2009) have also made some blunt, limited use of the concept to make sense of online social practices. As I will explain, the popular deployments of the concept diverge somewhat from the more strictly theoretical usages of the term. Thus, I make a distinction here between the vernacular and the theoretical deployments of subculture, which I will return to below. Tracing the subculture/postsubculture debate here allows me to critique this work while also developing the framework for a broader conceptualisation of belonging that emerges from the conversations I have had with the young people at the heart of this project.

A. K. Cohen (1955) popularised the use of the term 'subculture' in *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*²⁸. The link between subculture and deviance as a theoretical framework for understanding gangs in the Chicago School continued in the work of Merton (1957) and Becker (1963), building upon the earlier foundational work of Thrasher (2005 [1927]). The concept of subculture entered into broader usage in research on patterns of youth leisure and style through the work of the Birmingham Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). The CCCS adapted the concept as a means of providing an interpretation of the stylistic responses of young working class males in post-Second World War Britain.

²⁸ Blackman (2005) notes that the origins of subculture have been variously misrepresented by scholars including Brake (1980) and Thornton (1997).

According to the CCCS, post-War British youth subcultures were symbolic of continuing expressions of class-based solidarity among working class youth. The CCCS regarded working class consumers not as passive recipients of mass cultural products, but rather saw such products as a lever for forms of hegemonic struggle. Thus, subsequent CCCS work on youth by Hebdige (1979) provided a more elaborate interpretation of working class youth's use of style and other resources in what he referred to as semiotic guerrilla warfare. Using Levis Strauss's (1966) concept of bricolage and Barthes' (1977) concept of signifying practice, Hebdige considered how the visually spectacular image of punk rock in late 1970s Britain resonated with the socio-economic climate of an industrial nation in decline (Robards & Bennett 2011).

The dominance of subcultural theory held sway in youth cultural studies until the late 1990s when a new series of critical debates emerged concerning the continuing validity of the concept of subculture. Instead, an alternative post-subcultural paradigm started to achieve currency. Originally coined by Redhead (1990), the term postsubculture was substantially developed, and theorised, by Muggleton (2000) who suggested that contemporary youth culture can no longer be regarded as a direct reflection of class background. Rather, Muggleton argues that contemporary youth identities are a product of individual choice and reflect the heightened reflexivity that is part and parcel of late modern, consumer-based societies (Chaney 2004).

In his work on youth and popular music, Bennett (1999, 2000) argues that the collective expressions of contemporary youth, rather than adhering to the fixity of class and neighbourhood based subcultures as depicted, for example, in the work of Brake (1985), exhibit qualities more closely associated with what French sociologist Maffesoli terms neo-tribes. According to Maffesoli (1996: 98),

neo-tribes are 'without the rigidity of the forms of organisation with which we are familiar, [tribe] refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form'. The deployment of the neo-tribe as a theoretical framework in youth cultural research has been such that it has become a significant element in the postsubcultural turn (St. John 2003; Luckman 2004; Cummings 2006).

The subculture/postsubculture debate has continued, giving rise to a series of critical positions on the continuing currency – or not – of subculture as a meaningful concept for understanding the cultural practices of contemporary young people (Robards & Bennett 2011; Bennett 2011). Hodkinson (2004a, 2004b) has argued that while postsubcultural theory may be useful for understanding some aspects of contemporary youth culture, such as dance culture, other youth cultural groupings such as 'goth' exhibit qualities of collective and stylistic fixity that adhere more closely to conventional subcultural readings.

Subculture Online

Hodkinson's (2002a, 2002b, 2003) work on online goth subculture also operates as a point of resistance to the trend towards the postsubcultural. Hodkinson argues that while the internet can potentially 'enhance cultural fluidity' (2003: 285) – enabling a postsubcultural reading of the space – it 'can also function to enhance and intensify the boundaries that separate cultural groupings' (2003: 285). Thus, Hodkinson identifies the internet as a medium that can on the one hand reinforce and perpetuate traditional subcultural models of belonging, while on the other also provide a platform for multiple intersections of varying styles, tastes, lifestyles and cultural practices, generating a sense of belonging more consistent with postsubcultural models of belonging. Hodkinson stresses the

former through his fieldwork with goths, arguing that just as in offline social situations, individuals online tend to gravitate towards those with whom they share some sense of familiarity. However, Hodkinson's later empirical work with Lincoln (Hodkinson & Lincoln 2008) which likens the use of online journals by teenagers to the importance of bedrooms as spaces for the articulation of identity, seems to soften on this point somewhat, arguing that 'rather than forming fixed collective groupings... young people today are more likely to... [negotiate] personal paths through a myriad of temporary and partial identities' (Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008: 29).

It is not my contention here to argue against the reality that individuals seek familiarity in social encounters as argued by Hodkinson. Rather, the 'systems of belonging' approach that I develop below seeks to provide an additional dimension to this argument by considering and applying a new configuration of online sociality that centres on the individual as the pivotal node in a network of individuals rather than on a shared sense of style as exemplified by Hodkinson's work on goths. Indeed, subcultural research is clearly oriented towards style-based youth, excluding many young people – including my own participants – who do not clearly adhere to a particular style.

Kahn and Kellner (2003) offer another conceptualisation of subculture on the internet, that I would argue strays away from the theoretical usage of the concept described above, and tends more towards the vernacular usage of the term. They examine the politicised nature of 'Net subcultures', which they conceptualise as wholly separate to 'traditional' subcultures:

Whereas many traditional subcultures, like the Beat Generation, could aspire to the spirituality of “immediate” experience and intimate face-to-face communal relations, this is increasingly difficult for the post-subculture generation. Instead, the new subcultures that are arising around the evolving Internet appear as wholly mediated and committed to the medium of network communication that they correctly recognize as their foundation.

(Kahn & Kellner 2003: 299)

There are various problems with Kahn and Kellner’s framing of ‘Net subcultures’, most of which can likely be attributed to the rapid changes to the internet in the past decade that I detailed in Chapter 1 when discussing the rise of the social web. However, it is important to flag, first, their assumption that online subcultures somehow replace offline subcultures, and second, that interactions mediated online are devoid of intimacy. As Brad, the 20-year-old tradesperson discussed in Chapter 4 who had an unintentionally semi-public and intimate exchange with a girl on his Facebook page would attest, the internet can be a very intimate social space. This is true not only due to the promise of ‘online’ relationships crossing into the ‘offline’²⁹ (a false binary which I have worked to resist in earlier chapters), but also because social interactions mediated by the internet can also be intimate in and of themselves. Similarly, the forms of belonging that are made possible online do not necessarily replace offline forms of belonging as argued by Kahn and Kellner (2003). Instead, when the online/offline binary is removed, a much more accurately complex conceptualisation of belongings can emerge. Belonging can be experienced in-person, in physical spaces, mediated by verbal and non-verbal gestures, by symbolic exchanges ranging from laughter to fashion; or in non-physical spaces, mediated by a phone call, or by the written or typed word as in an

²⁹ For example, Hardie and Buzwell, in their Australian study into finding love online, found that ‘only relatively rarely did the romantic online relationship remain purely in cyberspace’ (Hardie & Buzwell 2006: 10).

exchange of love letters or a Facebook comment thread, organising a weekend holiday to be shared with friends. Just as we do not consider a telephone conversation as separate to and apart from our everyday lives, nor should the social interactions mediated by the internet be framed as radically apart, or new.

In reinscribing this binary, Kahn and Kellner (2003) also advance an argument that the subcultures they were studying were distinct because they were mediated online. Rather than cohering around the kinds of style-based subcultures explored by the CCCS, Kahn and Kellner seem to focus on collectives of practice or consumption, such as users of a particular bulletin board or members of MUD/MMO sites. Consistent with Turkle's (1995) reading, Kahn and Kellner argue that identities on the internet are 'often hybridic and complex' with postsubcultures regarded as 'dissolving classical cultural and political boundaries that appear too rigid and ideological for Internet life' (2003: 300). Again, note the implication here that 'Internet life' is somehow distinct from offline life. Paradoxically, despite these dissolving boundaries, Kahn and Kellner go on to identify what they term online postsubcultures as also exhibiting 'clearly defined political orientations' (2003: 300) which again reproduces a tension between the unitary and multiplicitous configurations of self and belonging.

Other cultural research on the internet as a whole has often tended to take 'subculture' as something of a given. Healy (1997: 65), for example, describes the internet 'as a loose collection or "ecosystem" of subcultures', while Bassett (1997: 538) refers to internet chat rooms as 'subcultural spaces'. Similarly, Papacharissi conflates the term subculture with the notion of 'subnetworks... of taste or online "caste" systems that reinforce or question existing inequalities' (2009: 205). Problematically, however, according to Bennett (2004), such

applications of subculture appear to strip the term of its original theoretical context and redeploy it in increasingly arbitrary and unqualified ways. What was once an exclusively theoretical terminology has entered the realm of vernacular discourse through use by the contemporary media and leisure industries. This shift from the academic or theoretical, to the vernacular or popular usage of the term, has served to problematise the concept of subculture more broadly.

Subculture may also be used as a discursive tool through which young people understand themselves as crossing over a series of different lifestyle practices and sensibilities. When subject to scrutiny, these vernacular subcultural discourses tend more towards the post-subcultural. Thus, in the following section, I demonstrate that young people's use of the internet, and the various forms of belonging they make visible online, exhibit tendencies that align far more readily with post-subcultural or neo-tribal types of association than with existing subcultural models of explanation.

Within, Across and In-between Belongings

Fundamental to the performance of identity (regardless of whether or not this performance is conceptualised as 'virtual' and thus often lesser in the real/virtual dichotomy) is the notion of belonging, which in youth studies and broader sociological terminology is often analysed through subcultural frameworks. As Bauman observes, identity as a concept was 'born out of the crisis of belonging' (2004: 20) and yet simultaneously, identity is often expressed in terms of belonging. This study has begun to reveal that the ways in which young people describe their own sense of belonging, in discussions around social network sites, is fluid and broad. Rather than adhering to the strict boundaries of belonging implied by subcultural frameworks, the identities being

performed on social network sites (and subsequently reflected upon by participants) would align more closely, although not absolutely, with a neo-tribal reading of belonging.

In essence, although using the notion of subculture to delineate terms of cultural association with others, the vernacular understanding of the term by young people in this study points to a series of identity-projects which are highly reflexive, individually derived and acted out across a diverse range of sites and spaces. In this sense, the findings of this study tend to bear out Bennett's (2004) earlier observation that, rather than offering a new domain for the construction of 'subcultural' relationships, online social interactions tend to replicate what is already apparent in face-to-face relationships. Thus, tendencies already in evidence at the face-to-face level are often accentuated and given a greater degree of presence through participation in social network sites.

The profiles that constitute social network sites rely on cultural frames of reference to act as referents in the process of performance: images (or other invocations) of bands, a list of favourite books or a profile picture featuring the profile's author in her favourite football jersey. While these performances require some level of what Thornton refers to as 'subcultural capital' (1996) to both enact and decode, the overall identity these performances contribute to does not adhere to the rigidity implied by subcultural categorisation.

Grant, for example, a 20-year-old male living on the Gold Coast in his fourth year of an Engineering degree and working in retail, saw his MySpace profile as 'a picture of what your personality is like, and what you like'. He described dance music as an important part of his profile and he recognised that it

situated him as someone who attended nightclubs that played dance music. However, he also made a point of separating himself from the practices of illicit drug use and smoking which he saw as inherently involved with his taste in music and the practice of going to night clubs. Dale, an 18-year-old male living on the Gold Coast and working in the hospitality and retail industries made similar connections with his interest in dance music and the practice of attending night clubs. However, he went further to implicate his taste in music in his self-narrative: 'that music is my life'. Dale also foregrounded his sexuality as central to his identity, seeing himself as 'a typical gay 18-year-old having fun on the Coast'.

By deploying dance music as an undercurrent element in the identities they performed online, both Grant and Dale reflexively observed that their taste in music implied a subcultural connection to other practices – namely going to night clubs (for both) drug usage (for Grant) and being gay (for Dale). They recognised the implicit rigidity of conceptualising themselves in singular subcultural terms and subsequently mounted what might effectively be called a postsubcultural critique of their own online identity performances. By rejecting some associated practices (drug usage) and strengthening or conforming to the stereotype of other, possibly tenuous associations (gay community), Grant and Dale were recognising the expected or implied rigidity in their common practice and effectively resisting or playing with that rigidity.

This points to an often overlooked aspect of Muggleton's (2000) reading of postsubcultural identity. According to Muggleton, although postsubcultural identities are most readily identified through the visual pick-and-mix assortment of styles adopted by post-subculturalists, equally important are the identity discourses that young people create to explain such eclecticism. Such

discourses also draw on elements of perceived 'subcultural' narratives – in the above case, club culture, drug use, and gay identity – selectively adopting particular aspects of these narratives and leaving out other aspects to produce an individualised narrative of identity. However, the everyday operationalisation of such narratives, across an array of cultural practices is, by contrast, suggestive of an inherently post-subcultural form of engagement with different clusters of youth cultural practice as these unfold across Australia's Gold Coast.

What is Subculture?

When asked to describe what subculture is, participants variously defined the concept as a small group within a parent culture and gave examples such as 'hardcore kids', 'skaters', 'footie boys', 'club kids', 'punks', 'goths', 'emos', and 'hippies' right through to more abstract, non-traditional categorisations such as 'gym-junkies'³⁰ and even 'volunteers' and 'vegetarians'. Most descriptions of a proposed subculture, aside from the more abstract non-traditional ones, also included some preconceived notions about clothing, musical tastes, and attitudes (concerning, for instance, alcohol and drugs). However, these descriptions were, in each instance, reflexively positioned as awkward, ill-fitting generalisations. For example, no interviewees identified themselves as strictly belonging to a single subculture, although they did state that they recognised elements of subculture within their own self-narratives. There was a clear sense that these articulations of belonging were positioned *in-between* what they described as subcultures or rather what they conceptualised through various terminologies as models of belonging, thus resisting alignment with pre-existing groups of individuals.

³⁰ Usually men who regularly work out at gyms.

Tim (18), for instance, described himself as ‘a drifter’ between friendship groups that he characterised according to cultural and sporting practices:

I dunno... I used to skate in Sydney and I used to ride bikes and stuff so I can mix with skaters as well as like with my music tastes I can... mesh with the hardcore fellas as well. And like sport plays a big part in that as well. Like football guys³¹ I don't know I just get along with them much better than say soccer fans or something. Yeah. I have no idea why, it's just... me as a person. I get along with footballers better.

Tim (18)

At the core of Tim’s ability to ‘drift’ between friendship groups (and between seemingly coherent sets of young people – skaters, hardcore fans, football players) is a strong emphasis on ‘competence’ (Driver 2011: 980). He is able to move between these groups – which might be framed as subcultures – because he has some literacy, some ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1996), in each of these groups.

Eric (20) was able to articulate an in-between sense of belonging more clearly, describing his attendance at dance music festivals: ‘...while I may belong to that [festival subculture], I wouldn't say I only belong to that. I think I'm part of other ones as well. And I wouldn't say I'm totally involved in them’. Aaron (22) similarly explained that he didn't think of himself as belonging to a single subculture, but did describe ‘taking stuff from each one’ (his roots in rural Australia, his participation and employment in Gold Coast nightclubs, and also a broader sense of connection to the Gold Coast) and forming a ‘less exclusive’ sense of identity and belonging:

³¹ In Australia, ‘football’ commonly refers to the National Rugby League or the Australian Football League codes, whereas ‘soccer’ describes the code of football more common throughout the world (excluding North America).

I wouldn't say I belong to a subculture. I'd say I'd take stuff from each one and... uphold certain qualities of different subcultures. But I wouldn't say that I'm more inclined to one than the other. Subcultures... are becoming less and less attached. I think that association is becoming less tight? In subcultures especially. There's this big push nowadays to be an individual, and almost defy labels... Some people try not to conform to one – I don't know – one image. I do believe subcultures are becoming less and less tight-knit. So it's hard to label someone as part of one subculture. We're becoming less and less exclusive, I'd say.

(Aaron, 22)

Aaron is a first year sociology student who works at a bar on the Gold Coast and regularly attends dance parties. More so than any other participant, likely because of his interest and entry-level undergraduate training in sociology, this quote demonstrates a relatively complex critique of subculture as a theoretical frame through which young people's everyday experiences of belonging could be understood. He didn't necessarily have the time and the vocabulary in the interview to mount the kind of critique that this chapter explicates, but as he indicates, the core of an argument lingers in his words very powerfully. Aaron explains that he feels like he belongs – to a group of friends, to a set of practices associated with dance culture, to a sense of place on the Gold Coast – but that the way he conceptualises belonging is multiplicitous. Aaron goes as far as to say that because of a 'push' (presumably from society, from culture) towards being more 'individual', organising oneself under a single banner – a subculture – is untenable. The reality, he explains, is much more complex.

Just as Aaron flags his interest in dance music as part of his system of belonging, so too does Silvia (15) mention her investment in metal music as an important part of her life. She also takes a particular satisfaction in people's responses to her interest in metal: 'Everyone looks at me funny when I say that. They don't expect me to be into metal... Because I have blonde hair... Because

they stereotype me as someone I'm not'. Although she expresses her own experience of belonging (and not belonging) in different terms when contrasted to Aaron, there is a common thread in both of their accounts, which is essentially about multiplicity and about resisting rigid models of belonging. Rather, a much messier, more complex, and certainly more nuanced account of belonging is being described here.

Camilla (24) also described a fluid set of belongings, anchored primarily in music, but also concerned with her identity as a volunteer:

Camilla: I'd say I belong to at least a couple [of subcultures]. I think music... I don't know, it's weird. The music I like has become really cool, so it's more mainstream. But yeah... the people I go to those odd little venues with are probably part of a subculture. *I was volunteering at an animal shelter, so maybe that's a subculture? Because it's not something everyone does...* I like any music that's not country basically. I grew up studying music so I like lots of classical too. It's not necessarily cool now but I think it's more respected? Um, and yeah, like I sort of went through a bit of a goth stage. There were still goths around when I was in high school, but there are emos now... I used to like grunge and punk.... I was a little odd back then, for saying what I liked. Going to festivals was a must-do thing for people my age.

Int.: When you said before that you identified with goth in your past, do you think that this idea of goth has changed? Do you still identify as a goth?

Camilla: I still have friends that are goths. Yeah, I don't know. I think if emos hadn't come along -- like everyone hated goths. It didn't matter what kind of group you belonged to, surfies or hippies and all that, everyone hated them [goths]. But I think with emos around and their music being more mainstream now, has sort of put them side by side? But I guess everyone hates emos too don't they?

Int.: Why?

Camilla: Um, I don't know why. I couldn't say. I guess it's just one of those stereotypes, like [in hushed tones, whispering] they cut themselves, they cry [laughs].

More so than other participants, Camilla described a strong connection to a vernacular notion of subculture – her own personal definition of ‘the goth scene’

– that she described primarily through music. As with the other participants discussed in this chapter, however, Camilla also problematised the stable and exclusive nature of this sense of belonging. She wonders here, almost as an aside to herself, whether her work as a volunteer at an animal shelter also positions her within some kind of ‘volunteer subculture’. She also describes an uncertainty about her current identity as a goth. Does being a volunteer at an animal shelter make you part of a volunteer subculture? How do you know when you are not a goth anymore?

If we take the definition offered up by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1976: 13), ‘sub-cultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their “parent” culture’. They go on to explain that subcultures ‘must be focussed around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces’, again ‘differentiating’ them from the wider culture (Clarke et al. 1976: 13). In this sense, perhaps volunteering at an animal shelter is a kind of vernacular subculture, albeit a ‘loosely-defined strand’ in the terms of Clarke et al. (1976). As Camilla points out, not many people do volunteer their time like this, so there is a certain kind of differentiation from a wider parent culture. There is also a clear focus around activities (caring for animals), and around space (shelters). Similarly, perhaps Grant (20), Dale (18), Aaron (22), and Eric (20) are all part of a vernacular dance subculture on the Gold Coast, unified by practice (dancing and drinking) and spaces (night clubs). And yet, there is something uneasy about this conclusion, about this reliance on a vernacular notion like subculture with a rich theoretical tradition. It is far too neat, and certainly not what these young people described. Grant, Dale, Aaron and Eric may share an appreciation for the dance music played at night clubs on the Gold Coast, but there is no singular concept

of subculture at work here beyond practice and place. They do not identify themselves as belonging to these practices and places – to this subculture – because for them, no such single subculture truly exists.

The kinds of reflexively constructed accounts of identity described in this chapter are instead somewhat more consistent with Muggleton's notion of liminal subcultures in which 'groups have begun to break out of the very boundaries through which they are defined' (2000: 75). What does this have to do with social network sites, though? At the beginning of this project, it was not my intention to map out the ways in which young people's articulations of belonging resisted the rigid frames of 'subculture'. However, in discussing the identities young people performed on MySpace and on Facebook, this critique of singular, exclusive forms of belonging was too powerful not to include here. The crucial point is that social network sites require individuals to piece together what they constitute as self-identity, and it is to be expected that this reflexive process will intensify the need for young people to develop a coherent sense of self (or not, by way of resistance) in order to participate in digital culture.

While Muggleton examines eclecticism in terms of fashion and appearance, it is my assertion that the rigidity and implied cohesiveness of the subcultural model is problematised by a broader kind of eclecticism, manifest in all cultural configurations: not only fashion but also food, music, sports, travel, films, place, literature, civic participation (from political debate to volunteering at an animal shelter), and so on, encompassing any form of cultural practice. Whereas Muggleton argues for the category of 'crossover counterculture' or liminal subculture reminiscent of Gottschalks' 'freak style' that is 'unwilling to embrace any recognisable (sub)cultural style' (Gottschalk in Muggleton 2000: 77) I would

extend this resistance to subcultural labels, having observed it in this study, and argue there is something more complex at work here.

A partial sense of belonging, or belonging to multiple categories, both of which are described by Aaron (22), Silvia (15) and other participants discussed above, serve as examples of a postsubcultural trend emerging in the reflexive construction of identity. Rather than belonging exclusively to a subsection of a parent culture (as described by Clarke et al. 1976) and being aware of how (and why) that respective group deviates from general culture, subculture has become a discursive construct, more akin to a palette of tastes that the individual can draw from, modify and remix in achieving a reflexive understanding of self. In this sense, what this study reveals are a series of constructions of 'subculture' operationalised by young people on the Gold Coast to describe a diverse series of practices and tastes that are, conceptually speaking, far more closely aligned with current sociological interpretations and applications of neo-tribalism than with subcultural theory. Rather than organising their systems of belonging around a particular taste or style (exemplified by the goths in Hodgkinson's work) the participants in this study appear to conceptualise their own sense of belonging in a much more multiplicitous (yet, interestingly, simultaneously persistent), inter-connected, fluid and individual-centred way. However, while I would argue that the neo-tribe model proposed by Maffesoli (1996) and advanced by Bennett (1999, 2000) offers a more conceptually congruent alternative to the subcultural framework, there are instances in which this model, as it stands, is also insufficient to describe the sociality occurring on social network sites.

Re-thinking Neo-tribes

Maffesoli's (1996) original neo-tribe model of belonging is in need of some refinement. The practice of online networking (in the more traditional sense) adheres quite neatly with Maffesoli's original deployment of neo-tribe as bespeaking an inherently fragile, ephemeral and essentially fluid form of social engagement. However, the formation of more stable networks (and the articulation of these offline networks in an online space) suggests an emergence of more permanent groupings, albeit ones that are facilitated and managed by a medium that transcends conventional understandings of collective social activity. Participants, for instance, report 'de-briefing' on Facebook after a weekend of partying and socialising, by recounting stories and commenting on images from the weekend's events. It is my contention that a new process of tribalisation is occurring here – one not envisaged by Maffesoli.

On the basis of my findings, there would appear to be a critical problem with Maffesoli's theorisation of neo-tribe, notably in its conviction that neo-tribal associations result only in temporal bondings characterised by short-lived bursts of sociality. Nowhere in Maffesoli's interpretation is there scope for the possibility of self-selecting neo-tribal groupings producing their own sense of permanence based around an affectivity grounded in mutual understandings – aesthetic, political, or otherwise. This, however, is precisely what the findings of this study would tend to suggest. While the sensibilities manifested by interviewees exhibit some neo-tribal qualities, the resulting forms of sociality cannot in every instance be read as a series of fleeting and temporal associations.

In the following section I develop my argument for what I describe as a 'systems of belonging' approach, which recruits an array of perspectives in

youth culture research, seeking to conceptualise the various ways in which young people articulate or come to be positioned within 'systems of belonging'. Rather than existing in opposition, I argue that various accounts of belonging – from subculture to postsubculture and neo-tribe, but also community, imagined affinity, and lifestyle movements – might be made to work together as components of a much broader understanding of youth culture.

A Systems of Belonging Approach

The profiles that constitute social network sites are rich with symbolic meaning. They serve as manifestations of identity-work, and as spaces in which social interactions are carried out and displayed and archived, adding to the reflexive project of self. Discussing these profiles with my participants allowed me to uncover, more broadly, rich stories of belonging. However, these stories do not fit neatly into the frameworks of belonging I have available to me. Tracing the subculture/postsubculture debate has given me a framework to begin with, and Maffesoli's (1996) neo-tribe brings another layer of insight to that picture.

The 'virtual communities' described by Rheingold (1994) served a purpose in the early considerations of belonging on the web as discussed in Chapter 1, but they now seem dated and no longer explain the everyday experiences of the web for many. Tuszynski's (2006) work on what she describes as an online community formed around a common interest in the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, demonstrates that these communities do exist, but not for the young people with which this project has engaged. Neither MySpace nor Facebook are communities simply because the producers of these sites share a platform (Turner 2011). A sense of community can, however, play-out in these spaces, as can the familial ties described by Mark (26) earlier in this chapter, or

demonstrations of cultural tastes and leisure practices described by Aaron (22), Silvia (15), and others. However, as I have argued above, the frameworks at my disposal for understanding these multiple and everyday experiences of belonging are limited, in that they are often theorised and applied in ways that make them distinct and separate from each other, without scope for blending frameworks.

In the final section of this chapter, it is my intention to provide an opening-up and a linking-together of perspectives in youth culture research and to conceptualise the various ways in which young people articulate or come to be positioned within what I refer to as 'systems of belonging'³². It is my argument that various models of belonging in youth research offer rich and valuable insights into the social and cultural lives of young people, including those described in detail in this chapter – subculture, postsubculture, neo-tribe – and also other concepts concept that I have not theorised in a detailed way here, such as national identity and family. Rather than existing in opposition or as separate, these accounts of belonging might be made to work together as components of a much broader, more everyday understanding of youth culture.

While I have demonstrated in the previous part of this chapter that none of my participants indicated a clear allegiance to any particular subculture (with the exception of Camilla, 24, who at one stage identified as a goth), it is not my intention to claim that subculture as a theoretical model is worthless. I have outlined, for instance, how Hodkinson's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006) ongoing work continues to make effective use of subculture as a theoretical framework. It is, however, my intention to argue that subculture – whether deployed in the

³² While Rojek uses the term to describe 'tribal systems of belonging' (2008: 79, italics added) in relation to certain tattooing practices, he does not develop the term further.

vernacular or theoretical sense – is not the complete picture, or a model that helps to understand the kinds of belongings articulated by my participants.

All too often, frameworks and approaches that seek to conceptualise human experience in neat unproblematic terms actually work to silence the lived everyday experiences of those who associate with, participate in, and reflexively produce and constitute an array of collectivities or systems of belonging. Systems of belonging can include families, circles of friends, local communities, a connection to sense of State or national identity, an association with a cultural product (such as a television show, a movie franchise, a game, a novel), an international network and so on. At the most basic level, a direct relationship between two people (a friendship, for instance) constitutes one form of belonging, while at larger and more complex levels, an association (formal or informal, personal or impersonal) to an institution, a social movement or an element of culture can connect individuals to a broader form of belonging. Taken together, from the smallest forms of belonging (one to one) to the largest (one to many), these relationships the individual has to the social and cultural world can be understood as systems of belonging.

An open systems of belonging approach acknowledges multiplicity, contradiction and overlap in identity-project assemblages. It is also an approach that can be brought to bear to understand everyday experiences of belonging for young people, rather than the more spectacular or deviant forms of belonging traditionally focussed upon in subcultural studies.

Multiplicity

One of the most central concepts in a systems of belonging approach is multiplicity of belongings. In Chapter 2, I quoted Cheung (2004) at length,

describing the multiple versions of self that are performed on personal homepages, prior to the rise of profile-based social network sites. Despite the apparent contradictions and elements of a narrative 'in-process' (Kristeva 1986) in Cheung's (2004: 59) reflection on his own multiplicitous identity (as the Chinese-American lecturer who is passionate about gay fiction and also heterosexual pornography, with a wide array of leisure pursuits) there is also a sense of coherence at work. Thus, where multiple, seemingly contradictory and even potentially fragmented identity-projects can still operate coherently, an open systems of belonging approach provides a useful theoretical position from which to resist discourses that would frame multiplicity as immobilising, or that would cede the subject as a work-in-progress, a singularity with the proviso that the belongings engaged in by the subject become stable and complete. Again, also returning to the threads that I introduced in Chapter 2, Gergen (1991) recognises the always 'in-process' nature of identity-work, but concludes on a pessimistic note in relation to the workability of such a concept. He argues that the conditions of postmodernity – of continuous reflexive self-construction and reconstruction, of negotiating multiplicity – can be immobilising, to the extent that 'the center fails to hold' (Gergen 1991: 7). I would suggest the opposite, based on the findings from this project. A systems of belonging approach takes up this contingency, suggesting that ongoing, reflexive identity-work is not only sustainable, but generative and potentially coherent.

Consider Tim's (18) account, from earlier in this chapter, where he describes himself as a 'drifter', moving between different friendship groups – skaters, hardcore music fans, football fans. The reflexive identity-work involved in describing oneself as a drifter is a good example of multiplicity. For Tim, this multiplicity is not destabilising or paralysing, but rather generative and coherent.

MySpace allows him to conceptualise these groups and to easily interact with them from afar (many of his Friends are in Sydney, and he is living on the Gold Coast). Alison (19), introduced in Chapter 5, tends to conceptualise her systems of belonging in terms of place. She describes 'bubbles' of Friends on Facebook, with the largest groupings around people from (1) her hometown, and (2) the Gold Coast. Aside from 'going out in Surfers'³³, Alison does not go into any detail about the cultural interests or leisure pursuits of the people she describes in her network of Friends. Shannon (23), who I quote in some detail in Chapter 4, also provides a complex, multiplicitous picture of belongings through the way he performs a sense of self on MySpace, including musical taste (his appreciation of *The Smashing Pumpkins*) his 'active' lifestyle, his interests in travel, and his varied network of Friends. Tim, Alison, and Shannon each describe their systems of belonging differently: from the micro-relations between friends, and local place-based belongings (typified by distinctions between hometowns and a new life on the Gold Coast for Tim and Alison), through to macro-relations to cultural interests (like music) and leisure practices (like skating and dancing) and broader world-views (like cosmopolitanism). It is this varied, complex, multi-level experience of affinities that the systems of belonging approach seeks to capture.

Everyday Youth

As Clarke et al. (1976: 16) explain, the 'great majority' of young people never enter a 'tight or coherent sub-culture'. Clarke et al. also go on to argue that individuals can move in and out of one or even several subcultures, and that relating to a subculture can be 'fleeting or permanent, marginal or central' (1976: 16). This caveat, which appears almost as an after-thought, seems to

³³ Surfers Paradise is a tourism hub and the central nightlife precinct on the Gold Coast, featuring two strips of nightclubs and pubs along Cavil Avenue.

provide a more ephemeral interpretation of subculture. In fact, this qualification appears more neo-tribal than subcultural. Unfortunately, this particular interpretation of subculture is rarely picked-up and operationalised in subcultural studies. Instead, it is the rigid, distinctive, different, spectacular elements of youth culture that receive the attention of youth culture research. The everyday young person, whose allegiances may indeed be fleeting, such as Camilla's (24) sense of connection to the goth subculture, or the in-between forms of belonging experienced by Aaron (22) and Tim (18), are silent in subcultural stories.

Alongside capturing and accounting for multiplicities, then, the second central use of a systems of belonging approach is to attend to everyday experiences of belonging. In this sense, a systems of belonging approach is clearly of use beyond youth studies but its usefulness is most visible in relation to a literature that constitutes an ongoing attempt to better understand the social and cultural lives of young people.

Cieslik (2003: 2) describes youth studies as a tradition made up of multiple theoretical and methodological traditions, and points towards the 'fixation' on youth in popular discourse as influencing or somehow driving the scholarly research into youth culture. This shared fixation, Cieslik implies, is one to be navigated carefully, given the potential impact of the research on the lives of young people themselves. Why does this fixation exist? Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) point towards the growing complexity of the 'youth phase', but also signal that 'the boundaries of childhood, youth and adulthood are blurred, indistinct, porous and changing' (Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011: 361). Thus, researching 'youth' is both necessary, to understand the complexities in the

'social process' (Wyn & White: 1997: 147) of growing up, but also problematic, in that youth as a concept is impossible to pin down.

It is also clear that young people - whether or not this phase, category, or process is tenable - are under a great sense of pressure to articulate and pursue a narrative of self that recruits various forms of belonging to an identity-project, often deploying or drawing upon multiple contradictory belongings while maintaining coherence. Thomson (2007), for instance, draws on Beck (1992), Bauman (& Tester 2001), and Giddens (1991) to describe late modernity as being characterised by 'risk, uncertainty and the breakdown of traditional values' (2007: 80), and invokes the curriculum vitae as an articulation of the individual's reflexive self-project. Thomson's example of the pressure to develop a curriculum vitae that effectively represents a path travelled towards employment demonstrates one dimension of a contemporary 'stress of youth'. Uncertain employment prospects and increasing credentialism trickle down to practices of CV building such as undertaking volunteer work (perhaps in animal shelters) in high school and pursuing an endless raft of 'certificates of achievement', given power by the promise that these tokens will come to represent the bearer as a dedicated, studious and hardworking person-employee. A systems of belonging approach allows the everyday young person who wishes to construct themselves in this way to do so without necessarily being excluded from other, seemingly contradictory identity-projects, especially those concerned with leisure practices that the potential-employer-construct might find dubious or problematic.

Combining Perspectives

The systems of belonging approach I have outlined here recruits existing frameworks to make sense of young people's experiences of belonging. For

some, like Mark (26), this was a focus on national identity and family. Camilla's (24) very temporary experiences with goth align with theoretical notions from postsubculture, while on the other hand one of Hodkinson's goth participants may exhibit a greater sense of collective and stylistic fixity that adheres more closely to conventional subcultural readings. Some of the ephemeral experiences of belonging described by Tim (18), Eric (20) and Aaron (22) can be understood through the lens of the neo-tribe, while their other, more stable experiences of belonging must be understood through notions of friendship hierarchies discussed in Chapter 5.

Taken together, a wide set of conceptualisations of belonging can effectively function together and alongside each other under a broader systems of belonging approach, where belongings are multiple and understood in everyday dimensions. A systems of belonging approach necessarily refuses to discard theoretical approaches to belonging if they continue to offer valuable tools for understanding. A systems of belonging approach is not an attempt to create new theoretical approaches to the same problems, but a reconsideration of the terrain on which studies to do with belonging have been carried out, and the often discipline-based exclusivity with regard to this or that approach. This approach acknowledges the value offered by various existing frameworks, and engages them to work together to reveal the complexity in contemporary identity-projects.

Chapter Conclusion: Is there a Digital Generation?

Buckingham (2006) provides a detailed response to the hype and rhetoric surrounding young people and their technology use in the late 1990s and early-to mid-2000s, but which clearly persists today. He argues that while there may

be 'broad systematic differences between what adults do with technology and what young people do with it' (2006: 11), further assumptions about 'digital natives', and the 'Net generation' (Bennett, Maton & Kevin 2008) are inherently problematic. To advance this area of scholarship, Buckingham says, we must jettison these kinds of generalisations and instead focus on research that will genuinely further our understandings of the experiences of young people (and the practices they engage in) around technology use. This call to action has also been at the core of my own research project, and is the foundation of the systems of belonging approach outlined here, which proposes to recruit a broad and effective array of understandings of youth culture and belonging in order to advance genuine understandings and defy hyperbolic generalisations.

While I would resist any attempts to draw boundaries around groups of people and describe them as a generation with a neat set of characteristics, it is clear that technology – the social web, and especially social network sites – does afford a new experience of sociality. As Harris, Wyn and Younes have argued, the internet serves as a 'potential new site for young people to express and/or transcend local identities... [where] digital technologies [can be used] to represent new ways of belonging in society' (2007: 21). It is this transcendence that the systems of belonging approach seeks to describe. The 'small but warmly human corner[s] of cyberspace' that Rheingold (1994: 18) described in his work on virtual communities may still exist³⁴, but for the participants in this project, the binary between the online and the offline (virtual and real, cyber and physical) is increasingly blurred and even false. Rather, while the kinds of belongings and interactions that occur on social network sites may be mediated online, they are very much anchored to the offline – to hometowns, to

³⁴ Consider, for instance, Tuszynski's (2006) work on communities of common cultural interests (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) connecting online.

friendships forged in physical spaces, to tastes and practices developed at concerts and in skate parks and on beaches and football pitches.

As Buckingham (2006) suggests, many young people may appear to be using online social spaces and technologies in different ways to older generations, but beneath the surface of these engagements are very familiar motivations: to connect, to create a narrative around oneself, and to belong. There is no truly 'digital generation'. Rather, digital technologies are becoming an integral part of our everyday lives, and many young people are in a 'vanguard' (Livingstone 2008) of adoption, developing the social conventions and strategies for being in these 'spaces'.

I began this chapter with two quotes from my participants: Aaron (22) explained in some very valuable detail the various ways in which he conceptualises his belongings, drawing on various 'subcultures' to 'defy labels' and produce a 'less rigid' identity for himself. The second opening quote, from Sylvia (15), 'I don't know where I fit in', is also very valuable. Despite also articulating a series of systems of belonging – from friendships to a romantic relationship to strong connections with family to a very detailed and reflexive relationship to metal music and the associated scene – Sylvia was uncertain about how these connections and relationships figured in a broader sense of belonging or 'fitting in'. It is clear that both Aaron and Sylvia 'fit' quite neatly into the previously described definition from Wyn and White (1997: 147) of youth as a 'process'. Even beyond youth, Giddens (1991) provides the reflexive project of the self to account for identity as an ongoing process across the life course. Talking with Aaron and Sylvia about what they do on social network sites allowed me to gain an insight into identity-projects undertaken by these young

people, and the various ways in which belonging – or reflections on belonging – factor into these reflexive projects of self.

In the first two parts of this chapter, I examined the subculture/postsubculture debate in the context of young people's use of social network sites. It is my argument here that the kinds of belongings articulated and made visible by participants in this project resist the basic characteristics of subculture, and instead tend more towards the postsubcultural qualities associated by Maffesoli (1996) with neo-tribes. However, I have also argued here that there are critical limitations to a neo-tribal understanding of the belongings mediated on MySpace and Facebook, especially around the persistent (or semi-persistent) experience of belonging. Thus, in the third part of this chapter, I advanced a broader 'systems of belonging' approach. It is my contention here that various understandings of belonging can be brought to bear on youth culture (subculture, neo-tribe, community, and so on) to provide an account that effectively captures the multiple, everyday, sometimes contradictory, reflexively constructed experiences of belonging that the young people in this project have described. In the following chapter, I reflect on the central arguments in this thesis, consider the limitations of this project and future research trajectories, while also re-asserting the value of a systems of belonging approach for furthering our understandings of contemporary mediated youth culture, belongings, and identities.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Despite the extraordinarily short time that Facebook has been with us, we can at least tentatively enquire what we have learnt from it, not so much what Facebook is but rather what its consequences might be for society, community and social relationships more generally.

(Miller 2011: 157)

In public discourse, there is a tendency to claim that all has changed or that nothing has, to argue that technology is utterly destroying teens' lives or providing for their salvation. The reality... is that none of these extremes is accurate.

(boyd 2008b: 296)

The small group of young people I spent time with during my fieldwork, whose lives I watched unfold on their social network sites, provided me with several valuable insights into mediated sociality. These insights were not always into how young people are using and producing the social web, but rather, these were insights into everyday lives. The hyperbole that drives popular discourse, discussed at the end of the previous chapter in relation to Buckingham's (2006) provocation around the question of a digital generation, often fails to incorporate this mundane, everyday dimension of social network sites. And yet, as Giddens (1991: 48) explains, 'in "doing" everyday life, all human beings "answer" the question of being; they do it by the nature of the activities they carry out'. Social network sites provide a space in which both critical and non-critical moments, fateful and mundane experiences, and everything in-between, can be ordered, articulated, and made visible.

In line with Miller's (2011) suggestion above, this thesis has sought to contribute to a broader understanding of contemporary society by examining a small yet important element of mediated sociality. In exploring the practices and strategies of and for 'being' in online social spaces of 33 young people living on

Australia's Gold Coast, I have uncovered a rich terrain of identity-work, relationship maintenance, and audience management. I have contributed to a dialogue on the ethical conduct of research involving young people in online social spaces. I have also drawn on the empirical foundations of this project to reconceptualise the ways in which 'systems of belonging' cohere and are made visible in contemporary society. In this final chapter, I explore the various limitations of this project, consider the implications for my findings, and discuss potential trajectories for future research and scholarship in this area.

Limitations

As with most qualitative research, there are clear limitations in terms of how these findings can be generalised. As I have said, this thesis has not sought to make broad claims about what all young people are doing on social network sites, but I have sought to explore the online social practices of a small group of young people in order to add depth to a broader understanding of young people's online social practices. Some of the practices I have reported upon here have been supported by research conducted elsewhere, including a tendency towards articulating existing networks rather than *networking* in a traditional sense (boyd & Ellison 2007; boyd 2008a), a reluctance to friend parents (West, Lewis & Currie, 2009) and a growing complexity in the ways audiences are managed online (Tufekci 2008a). Thus, although not generalizable, this research does contribute to an increasingly complex and fluid understanding of these sites and how young people use them.

It is also clear that there is an over-abundance of research that focuses on young people and their use of online social spaces, specifically on college students in North America (Gross and Acquisti 2005; Ellison, Steinfield &

Lampe 2007; Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer & Christakis 2008; Tufekci 2008b, 2008a; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2011). While I have moved somewhat beyond the university student demographic in my own study, my focus has still been on young people. This has served a particular purpose, and has resulted in what I believe is a useful contribution to the study of youth and youth culture. However, there is a broader limitation at work here in the focus specifically on young people and social network sites. Sourbati points out that new media are usually 'coded as the domain of younger generations' (2009: 1085), and argues that there is a great need for further qualitative research into intergenerational samples, to dispel the assumption that age is the sole factor determining older people's engagement with new media. While there is some research emerging into older demographics, such as 55-67 year-olds (Goode 2011), workers (Gregg 2011) and the implications of the social web before birth and after death (Leaver 2011), there are clear gaps.

To what extent are the practices reported upon in this thesis limited to young people? Or, indeed, are these online social practices of identity-work, of audience segregation, of managing multiplicity, applicable to a broader group, irrespective of age? This is an important limitation that I cannot properly answer, except to return again to Livingstone's argument that young people are 'in the vanguard of social networking practices' (2008: 394). As the social web becomes more ubiquitous, I would argue that the strength of this claim wanes. For now, however, focusing on this group of 33 young people on the Gold Coast, and exploring their online social practices, has provided a valuable insight into how a sense of self and belonging is managed and made visible online through an as yet very much unsettled set of social practices and identity performance strategies.

Beyond the broad limitations of qualitative research and research focussed on a particular 'group' of people (despite attempting to frame my usage of the concept of youth as moving beyond compartmentalisation), there are also two specific methodological limitations in this project. First, in retrospect it has become clear to me that follow-up interviews would have been invaluable, to attempt to capture a development of reflexivity between an initial and a subsequent interview. Did participating in this research project make my participants more sensitive to the ways in which they told stories about themselves online? Did they reflect more carefully in selecting profile pictures? Did they change their friending strategies after being asked to critically reflect upon them in an interview situation? In future projects of this nature, I plan to build follow-up interviews into the research design as essential rather than optional according to time and resources available.

Second, as described in detail in Chapter 3, part-way through the fieldwork I modified my research design to exclude the younger (15 to 17-year-old) participants from the friending and thus the profile observation phase of the fieldwork. This proved to be a limitation in the interview phase of the fieldwork, as I had to rely more heavily on self-reporting. I will not recount the specifics of the decision-making process here, as I have already done so in Chapter 3, but as I have argued, this change to the research design was necessary and important in order to properly observe the ethical framework I had developed (beyond the institutional clearance process) around the private nature of these spaces and the nuanced ethical considerations around participants aged under 18. In short, not friending these six younger participants allowed me to avoid any invasiveness that my presence in these online social spaces (even as passive observer) would create. Whereas in an in-person interview situation I

could 'leave a space open' so my conduct and the conduct of my participant could be passively or indirectly observed by a parent or guardian, I was unable to replicate this consideration in the online social spaces I was investigating, nor would it be appropriate to ask a participant to friend a parent or guardian for the purposes of the research.

As this ethical framework was still developing throughout the fieldwork, it was difficult for me to anticipate the challenges I would face. While I concede future challenges in new media research will potentially be equally difficult to anticipate, the experiences I have had in this project have made me reflect more critically on the ethics of research involving young people and new media. These experiences and reflections have also helped me to understand the research design process as necessarily dynamic and open, allowing researchers the flexibility to respond to challenges they did not anticipate.

The final limitation I wish to address here is related to a contrast between the rapid rate at which the social web changes, and the relatively slow and drawn-out nature of academic research. Loader and Dutton (2012), for instance, in their article on 'internet time', reflect on the rapid pace and nature of innovation around the internet over the past decade. In a mode of research where articles and book chapters can take several years (or more) to move from conceptualisation to publication, new media research 'dates' very quickly. While I have sought to publish my research progressively (Robards 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b; Robards & Bennett 2011), and present my work at conferences whenever possible in order to disseminate my research while it is still current, there is still an underlying limitation in what is achievable within the academic mode. In ten, twenty, fifty years, what will the value of this research be?

Any study of transient phenomena faces this challenge, but I would also argue that studying the social web at this still relatively early point in its development is important and valuable. The introduction of Facebook's 'timeline' profile in 2012, for instance, drastically changed the way the Facebook profile worked. Thus, fieldwork conducted in 2009 – 2010 may date quickly, but still captures a set of valuable insights into a particular period of the social web, and into a set of social practices of identity that are dynamic and still emerging.

Implications and Trajectories for Future Research

The implications of the research reported upon here are broad. My research has enabled me to comment on an array of stories in the local and national press concerned with young people and new media (Cooley 2010; Elder 2011; Jabour 2011; Jensen 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d; Johnston 2010; Killoran 2010a, 2010b; Lappeman 2010; Macgibbon 2011; Masters 2011; Mayberry 2011; Mayoh 2010; Truman 2010). I've also contributed by invitation to journals on educational integrity (Robards 2010b), public relations (Robards 2010a), and youth homelessness (Robards 2012c), seeking, in each case, to resist popular negative misconceptions about youth engagement in online social spaces, and instead seeking to highlight the productive and generative implications for this engagement. Beyond continuing to temper hyperbolic discourses about young people and new media (both positive and negative), I have identified two key areas for future research: the role of social network sites for 'at risk' young people, especially in relation to young homeless people; and the implications of the social web for civic participation.

Inclusion and 'At Risk' Youth

Based on a study of 201 young people recruited through a drop-in agency for homeless adolescents in Los Angeles, California, Rice, Monro, Barman-Adhikari and Young (2010) found that internet access and participating on social network sites can be greatly beneficial for young homeless people. 84 per cent of the young people in their study used the internet at least once a week, with almost a quarter of their participants spending more than an hour each day online. Their access points were often in public places such as libraries and youth service agencies, but also included access through a mobile phone, at a friend's home or wherever they happened to be staying:

Homeless adolescents used e-mail or social networking sites to connect to family and home-based, street-based, and online peers. Approximately one quarter used the internet to find a sex partner [...] homeless adolescents are using the internet and social networking sites to reach out to a broad set of social network ties, including not only street-based ties, but also family and home-based peers.

(Rice, Monro, Barman-Adhikari & Young 2010: 611)

While Rice et al. do caution against some of the negative implications associated with internet use amongst these 'at risk' young people – especially in terms of sexual health – they also draw attention to the great potential of sites like Facebook for positive connections with family and peer-networks. Rice et al. argue that, in situations where contact with family was positive (when the family relationship was not abusive, for example), social network sites provided the young people in their study with a useful opportunity for contact that they otherwise may have found difficult.

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, social network sites can provide an additional platform for interaction and for the strengthening of systems of belonging. The reasons given for preferring contact on social

network sites over a phone call, for instance, include economic rationale (calling can be expensive), not wanting to disturb the person they are calling ('leaving a message' so they can respond when they are free is preferable) and also a feeling of confrontation from the immediacy of real-time communication. Social network sites disrupt many of these prohibitive dimensions, although there are clearly important financial considerations associated with internet access (perhaps with the exception of public access points). Further, interaction on social network sites can be indirect. That is, a status update, for example, can be read by many but directed at nobody in particular. Thus, a user of a social network site can 'check up' on friends and family that also use the site without necessarily contacting them directly. Similarly, they can alert their network to recent life events without necessarily expecting a response. When the stakes are lower, so too can the prohibitive dimensions of contact with friends and family be diminished, especially for 'at risk' young people.

Similar to Rice et. al (2010), in an Australian study, Notley (2009) discovered various social inclusion benefits associated with internet use and participation on social network sites. Notley's ethnographic study involved nine young people aged 12 to 18 living in Queensland, Australia, all of whom were classified as 'at risk' of social exclusion due to homelessness, mental health issues, pregnancy, drug abuse, family illness, distress, and truancy (Notlet 2009: 1213). As my own research has demonstrated, sites like MySpace and Facebook are generally governed by practices of network articulation and maintenance rather than practices which involve meeting 'strangers' or networking in the traditional sense (see also boyd & Ellison 2007). In other words, most young people are friending and interacting with people they already know offline. Notley, however, found that her group of 'at risk' participants actually reported actively seeking

new contacts online, thus forging new 'opportunities for inclusion' (2009: 1221) and new systems of belonging. These systems revolved around or were instigated by cultural interests (a favourite television series, for instance) or the pursuit of practical knowledge (in areas such as parenting methods and skills). Could these online opportunities for inclusion described by Notley serve as sustainable solutions for people 'at risk'?

This is an important trajectory for future research. Not only is it important to better understand how social network sites are being used, but it is also crucial to draw on the experiences of young people themselves. Discursive framing and education concerning these spaces must be informed by a two-way process; educators, service providers, youth workers and researchers must learn new and still emerging literacies associated with 'being' online, and on how to negotiate a social world that moves between online and offline forms of sociality so fluidly. Young people, many of whom will have grown up developing and testing these literacies, will be the best teachers and guides.

Civic Participation

The internet is often framed as a site of great potential for improving civic participation amongst young people and is described as a resource available to young people who wish to organise politically (Woo-Young 2005; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007). Indeed, as Buskqvist (2007: 193) reminds us, new media technologies have often arrived with high hopes of democratic promise. In an edited collection titled *Young People, ICTs and Democracy*, editors Olsson and Dahlgren (2007) bring together a series of research interests on this topic of civic participation. In one chapter, Fenton points towards the nexus between young people and the internet as a solution to civic disengagement: 'the internet is... a medium that is more readily associated with young people, [and] young

people are increasingly associated with disengagement from mainstream politics' (2007: 19). By bringing these discourses of engagement and disengagement together and exploring new spaces of youth engagement, this collection provides an important perspective.

However, the various conclusions reached by the contributors are not the neat fixes some might expect. Bakardjieva (2007) draws on two qualitative studies of young people who actively used blogs and social network sites, primarily Facebook. She notices that while the proliferation of participation and investment in these social spaces is undeniable, the young people operating within them consistently downplay and disassociate themselves from their revolutionary or transformative dimensions. Instead, blogs and social network sites are described simply as mediums of the everyday where civic participation features only incidentally. Understanding this lived reality of young people is, according to Bakardjieva, the key to facilitating their political engagement.

What actually constitutes civic participation is clearly changing. As Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010: 27) argue, social network sites offer young people a place to 'have a say'. Thus, perhaps joining a Facebook group to support same-sex marriage or making a status update about asylum seeker policy constitute a form of civic engagement. Miegel and Olsson (2007: 231) consider a shift in conceptualisations of citizenship from what they describe (via Bennett 2007) as the 'dutiful citizen' towards the 'actualizing citizen'. Whereas voting and joining a political party are at the core of civic participation for the dutiful citizen, the actualizing citizen participates in civic life differently, favouring loose networks of community action (neo-tribal in the Maffesolian sense) and 'personally defined acts of participation' over voting and other traditional, institutionally sanctioned forms of action. Miegel and Olsson establish a generational divide between

these two approaches to citizenship, with young people tending towards the actualizing citizen approach. In their study of a Swedish-based youth political website, Miegel and Olsson explain that while there are attempts being made to engage young people in civic life online, simply using new media (even if the sites work well) is not enough. Rather, they argue that a more fundamental shift towards the actualizing citizen needs to occur, away from traditional, rigid party-based politics.

Could individual-centered, personally motivated forms of civic participation mediated by social network sites represent an important part of a new conceptualisation of civic life? Indeed, perhaps by adjusting the lens through which civic participation is measured, and taking an ‘actualized citizen’ approach to the question, a rich terrain of valuable civic participation will be made visible. Or perhaps the kinds of civic engagements enacted and made visible on social network sites will fall victim to the same online/offline binary this thesis has addressed through the ‘slacktivism’ (Christensen 2011) narrative that questions the ‘real life’ impact of activities mediated by the web. While exploring civic participation was not a central part of this thesis, it did emerge in some interviews subtly and incidentally, when participants described ‘political events’, such as sharing petitions and drawing attention to objectionable political material. I would argue that an exploration of the citizen-identity mediated in online social spaces is an important trajectory for future research.

The Good, the Bad, and the Everyday

There are many horror stories about the things that happen on social network sites. Hammond (2007) tells the story of the librarian who became the target of a hate group on Facebook, titled ‘For Those Who Hate The Little Fat Library

Man', because people didn't like the way he policed noise policies. This man had the breaks on his bike cut, he was abused, and members of the Facebook group would compete to take close-up photos of him and then post them to the group's wall. O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) talk about Facebook 'addiction', perpetuating a discourse that, as I have discussed, has written back onto the way the young people in this study describe even their own practices. My own participants, for instance, have described their usage of social network sites as 'addictive' (Shannon, 23) or as a distraction from school (Jonas, 17) or even as the root cause of a decline in the quality of social interactions (Camilla, 24). Often, these descriptions are tongue-in-cheek, especially around vernacular usages of terms like addiction, stalking, creeping and so on, as discussed in Chapter 5, when they are stripped of their more serious connotations. However, the practices that my participants have described to me, which I have in turn mapped out in this thesis, actually serve to resist the negative discourses that often frame engagement with social network sites. This is the very curious tension this thesis engages with.

A crucial part of this tension is related to what Jurgenson has described as 'the IRL³⁵ fetish', a 'fervor [sic] around the supposed corresponding loss of logged-off *real life*' (2012, emphasis original). The problem that Jurgenson points to here is that various discursive frameworks (and language itself) creates a distinction between the online and the offline. This distinction, this 'digital dualism', is a false one, and yet my own participants have propped it up. Camilla (24), for instance, was very proud to proclaim at the end of my interview with her that she was 'anti-Facebook', because she saw it as a distraction from what *really* mattered, from the important happenings of *real life*: 'Obviously I still

³⁵ In Real Life.

use it,' she said, 'but if I was committed, I'd just cut it. And I have thought about it.' Opting out, in order to pay more attention to the 'real' world, is a fundamental component of this fetish of the real, and presents a significant problem for the way in which technology use is being discursively framed:

If we can fix this false separation and view the digital and physical as enmeshed, we will understand that what we do while connected is inseparable from what we do when disconnected. That is, disconnection from the smartphone and social media isn't really disconnection at all: The logic of social media follows us long after we log out. There was and is no offline; it is a lusted-after fetish object that some claim special ability to attain, and it has always been a phantom.

(Jurgenson 2012)

It has been my argument that a distinction between online and offline forms of communication and belonging is a false one. As internet use and participation on social network sites becomes integrated into everyday practices – especially for young people who have been identified here as the 'vanguard' (Livingstone 2008: 394) and as 'early adopters' (Notley 2009: 1222) of these new mediated forms of belonging – the offline and the online constantly overlap, they are enmeshed. Often, especially in popular discourse, the central purpose for an offline/online dichotomy is to relegate all things 'online' to a position of obscurity and in-authenticity; to de-value systems of belonging that are mediated through the internet. What I have attempted to build here is a case for the great value of the systems of belonging mediated by social network sites and other social spaces on the internet, from a personal sense of identity-work around taste and cultural interests, to the articulations of social ties on both micro and macro scales; from friendships and families to national identities and subcultural or neo-tribal affiliations.

This research makes visible the various ways in which the young people in my study have performed identities. These identities are constituted through a still-emerging set of practices, especially around friendship and control, that borrow from the conventions and experiences of physical in-person social spaces, but do not operate as separate to or distinct from 'real life'. The implications of this research are broad, and give rise to a series of potential future research trajectories. As Miller (2011) explains, studying social interactions on sites like MySpace and Facebook are not only important to help us understand these sites themselves, but rather to help us understand contemporary society. The different ways in which the social interactions that constitute society are mediated require ongoing, sustained consideration and analysis. This research contributes to that broader picture, and privileges the voices of those individuals who are shaping and developing the practices of being and belonging.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Interview | |
| Date | |
| Time | |
| Location | |

| | | | |
|-------------------|-------|------------------|---------------------|
| Age | | Sex | M / F |
| Occupation | | Education | HS / TAFE / BA / PG |
| MySpace? | Y / N | Facebook? | Y / N |
| Residency | | Suburb | |

| | Key Questions | Funnelling Questions | Notes |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--------------|
| Phase 1: General | 1. How often do you use _____? | a. Once a week? Every day? A few times a day? | |
| | 2. Tell me about when you first started using _____? | a. How long have you been using it? b. Why did you start using it? c. Did you find it easy to use? | |
| | 3. Tell me about what you do on _____. How do you spend your time on there? | a. Do you mainly exchange comments or wall posts? Do you read blogs? Do you upload pictures? Do you look at profiles belonging to friends of friends? | |
| Phase 2: Identities & Presenting Self | 4. Can you describe to me what your profile looks like? | a. What kind of photos do you use? b. How do you describe yourself on there? c. Is your page different to other people's pages? | |
| | 5. Have your friends ever commented on the way you've presented yourself on _____? | ^ | |
| | 6. If someone that has never met you before went to your page, what do you think they'd think of you? | a. If they saw X for example, what do you think that says about you? | |
| | 7. Do you think there's a difference between how you are online and how you are offline? | | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | 8. Do you think identities change over time or do they stay the same? | a. If your profile was saved and stored for 10 years (like a time capsule) what would you think of it when you opened it up again? | |
| | 9. If your page was turned into a story, what would the story be about? | | |
| Phase 3: Subculture & Belonging | 10. Do you feel like you belong to a particular group of people on _____? | a. Just your friendship group? Or something more general? | |
| | 11. To what extent do the 'groups' people join or align themselves with on _____ have an impact on how you think of them? | | |
| | 12. What sort of groups do you belong to? | | |
| | 13. What do you think subculture means? | | |
| | 14. Do you think of yourself as belonging to a particular subculture or subcultures? (IF NO) Do you think there are people who see themselves as belonging to a particular subculture or subcultures? How does this play out on _____? | a. Do you think X, for example, is attached to a genre or a type of lifestyle or an interest that people might call a subculture? | |
| | 15. Is _____ a good way for people to feel connected or does it do the opposite and alienate people? | a. Meaningful connections vs. multiple? Quality vs. quantity? | |
| Phase 4: Friendship | 16. What do you do or what would you do if someone you didn't know added you as a Friend on _____? | a. What if you've met them once? b. What if they're a friend of a friend or you have a few mutual friends? | |
| | 11. Do you have any Friends on _____ that you don't know offline? | a. If you had to come up with a percentage of Friends on _____ that you don't know offline, what would it be? b. | |
| | 12. What do you think the difference is between a friendship with someone you only have online and a friendship you have with someone you know offline too? | | |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| | <p>13. What do you do when you get unwanted or unsolicited Friend requests or PMs from people on _____?</p> | <p>a. Like spam advertising?</p> | |
| | <p>14. Do you have 'close' friends on _____ and not so close friends?</p> | <p>a. For example, do you interact with some more frequently than others?</p> | |
| | <p>15. Thanks very much for your participation today. Is there anything else you'd like to add?</p> | | |

Appendix 2: List of Participants

| # | Alias | Sex | Age | Occupation | University? |
|----|-----------|-----|-----|--|-------------|
| 1 | Julie | F | 22 | Nursing student/retail | Yes |
| 2 | Jamie | F | 27 | Radio/writing student | Yes |
| 3 | Dora | F | 24 | Theatre student | Yes |
| 4 | Catherine | F | 20 | Communications student/retail | Yes |
| 5 | Naomi | F | 19 | Psychology student | Yes |
| 6 | Shannon | M | 23 | Arts student/concierge | Yes |
| 7 | Eric | M | 20 | Arts student/chess coach | Yes |
| 8 | Tim | M | 18 | Arts student/sales assistant | Yes |
| 9 | Mark | M | 26 | Master of Arts student | Yes |
| 10 | Alison | F | 19 | Communications student/hospitality | Yes |
| 11 | Melissa | F | 20 | Communications student | Yes |
| 12 | Camilla | F | 24 | Journalism student/hospitality | Yes |
| 13 | Charlotte | F | 19 | Arts student/waitress | Yes |
| 14 | Emma | F | 20 | Communications student | Yes |
| 15 | Carl | M | 21 | Journalism student/grocery store attendant | Yes |
| 16 | Bree | F | 20 | Arts student/fitness instructor | Yes |
| 17 | Kelly | F | 23 | Public Relations student | Yes |
| 18 | Debra | F | 21 | Journalism student | Yes |
| 19 | Amanda | F | 20 | Real estate secretary | No |
| 20 | David | M | 23 | Electrical apprentice/Army Reserve | No |
| 21 | Brad | M | 20 | Liquor store attendant/tradeperson | No |
| 22 | Claire | F | 25 | Child care | No |
| 23 | Jonas | M | 17 | High school student/cashier | No |
| 24 | Simon | M | 15 | High school student | No |
| 25 | Sharon | F | 17 | High school student/McDonalds employee | No |
| 26 | Silvia | F | 15 | High school student /butcher attendant | No |
| 27 | Adam | M | 16 | High school student/ice cream shop attendant | No |
| 28 | Kath | F | 16 | High school student | No |
| 29 | Cody | M | 21 | Grocer | No |
| 30 | Aaron | M | 22 | Languages student/bar staff | Yes |
| 31 | David | M | 18 | Retail | No |
| 32 | Grant | M | 20 | Engineering student | Yes |
| 33 | Lynne | F | 24 | Artist | Yes |

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