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**How Do Online Social Networking Sites  
Affect the Shaping of the Social Self in Late  
Modernity? The Case of Facebook**

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## Abstract

To what extent is the social self shaped by exposure to online social networking sites?

To shed light on this question, the following thesis will investigate Facebook use among a small section of the Irish population. By employing survey methodology and face-to-face interviews, this study unearthed a certain degree of ambivalence among Facebook users regarding their relationship with the site. While the majority of users find Facebook's suite of applications easy to use, there is a noticeable reluctance to divulge too much information about oneself online. Additionally, the data reveal a redefinition of the word 'friend' in the context of Facebook interaction, and a renegotiation of relationship networks because users feel compelled to accept friend requests without giving due regard to the strength or otherwise of the proposed social tie. Finally, Facebook appears to be motivating a reassessment of the rules of social engagement, as users attempt to interpret the complex rules of appropriate online behaviour.

Vistas of interaction have rapidly expanded in recent years. Internet communication has had a profound effect on human social ties because it is now possible to sustain a continuous, parallel presence in cyberspace that is congruent with one's offline existence. Consequently, the popularity of online social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter continues to provoke questions about their long-term impact on human sociality in both the real and virtual worlds. Facebook, one of several online social networking utilities, was launched in 2004 primarily as a way for university alumni to keep in contact with each other in the years following graduation. However, its user base quickly moved beyond this target demographic of college students to gain a global audience numbering in the hundreds of millions. Put simply, Facebook enables users to create and maintain communicative links with one another via online user profiles, making it possible to create new social ties, as well as to strengthen pre-existing networks.

Adam Acar suggests that "there are few available studies that explain the differences between real life and internet social networks" (2008:62). This pilot study seeks to narrow the perceived knowledge gap acknowledged by Acar. As such, I chose to undertake this investigation because of my relative unfamiliarity with the online social networking world. Since I have never operated a profile on an online SNS, I considered this an opportune instance to attempt to understand this phenomenon from a sociological point of view. The proliferation and growing popularity of sites like Facebook has prompted much academic interest in recent years, since they represent an innovative

and increasingly popular means for social actors to remain in contact with one another. Moreover, online social networking allows users to cultivate virtual biographies, in which a distinctly late modern form of identity performance can take place. Social actors now have the ability to live their lives in both the physical world and through their online experiences, while online SNSs also enable the expansion of social ties far beyond what would be expected, or indeed possible, in the offline world.

The creation of an online self necessarily involves the disclosure of information, which can have both positive and negative consequences for social actors. In their study, Nosko *et al* discovered that “age and relationship status were salient in describing who would or would not be likely to disclose information, while traditional variables such as gender were not significant” (2009:416). This suggests that the nature of one’s social ties, regardless of gender, is a determining factor in predicting how one will behave when online. This investigation will attempt to determine if sites such as Facebook offer users a new way of enacting their social selves, one that is reflective of life in the late modern era. Additionally, I wish to investigate the way in which Facebook use has affected the dynamics of maintaining social relationships, and by extension, its impact upon user behaviour in general.

To do this, I employed both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, in the form of a survey and a supplementary focus group. The collection of survey data proved relatively straightforward. The initial focus group was abandoned when two of the voluntary participants fell ill, thus precluding their participation. An ancillary, albeit smaller, focus group was assembled in lieu of this setback, and the data collection was conducted

without further problem. While a satisfactory sample was generated via the survey aspect of the research, the focus group consisted of just two participants, which limits the generalizability of its data to a certain degree. Notwithstanding this setback, it is hoped that this project will go some way to illuminating the burgeoning world of online sociality, with a view to better understanding its impact on the social actor.

## SOCIOLOGY AND LATE MODERNITY

Social analysis in the mid-to-late twentieth century has been primarily concerned with examining the social order from a post-modern perspective, since myriad factors have caused society to transform into an entity that is more nebulous and less cohesive than had been previously understood. Anthony Giddens suggests that the opposing forces of structure and agency are simply two sides of the same coin, while Zygmunt Baumann argues that “[t]he pressures aimed at the piercing and dismantling of boundaries, commonly called ‘globalization’, have done their job...all societies lie now fully and truly open” (2007:6). As such, the issues of modernity that informed much of sociological thinking in the early years of the discipline have been subordinated to a set of concerns that could be regarded as distinctly late modern in nature. Specifically, contemporary social theorists have identified an underlying lack of confidence in progress, and an erosion of trust in so-called ‘experts,’ as being indicative traits of modern social life. Bauman is decidedly pessimistic about the notion of progress, which he claims “stands for the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that...portends nothing but continuous crisis and strain” (2007:10). Consequently, a seam of self-reflexivity has been identified that points to an autonomy at work within social actors, which could be regarded as symptomatic of the pressures that characterise late modernity. As Ekberg argues, “[r]eflexive modernity is primarily defined by an increase in the awareness of risk, uncertainty,

contingency and insecurity and by an increase in attempts to colonize and control the near and distant future" (2007:345). Giddens suggests that "[i]t is the specifically reflexive form of the knowledgeability of human agents that is most deeply involved in the recursive ordering of social practices" (1984:3). The stock of knowledge with which social actors navigate daily life is constantly being revised, allowing us the freedom to alter the ways in which we both act and interact. Erving Goffman analogised human interaction in terms of actors performing before an audience, utilising both front and backstage protocols. It has been suggested that the "social front can be divided into traditional parts, such as setting, appearance, and manner...we may not find a perfect fit between the specific character of a performance and the general socialized guise in which it appears to us" (Goffman, 1956, no page numbers given).

The advent of online SNSs is significant; they allow users to carefully tailor and stage-manage a virtual adaptation of their offline biographies before a potential audience numbering in the millions. As such, the Internet could be considered a distinctly late modern stock of knowledge, a digital frontier in which sociality is free to manifest in new and challenging ways. These challenges may take the form of risks, which must then be addressed by the user. Ekberg asserts that "[t]he theory of the risk society is further characterized by threats to identity and the risks emerging from the collapse of inherited norms, values, customs and traditions" (2007:346). In the diffuse and often lawless realm of online interactions, it can often be difficult to predict the nature of such risks, and the consequences they may bring in both the online and the offline worlds. The online social self has emerged as a distinct

and viable entity in recent years, a symptom of the diffuse nature of the social actor in late modernity. As such, the study of how online SNSs have shaped this digitised self, and its offline counterpart, may prove to be of particular sociological significance.

## 2.2

## FACEBOOK: BUILDING SOCIAL TIES

Kirsty Young defines a social network as “a structure made up of individuals with a commonality, be it friendship, an interest, relationship, knowledge, experience or belief system” (2011:22). Online SNSs are of special interest to sociologists since they permit instant and wide-reaching communication on a continuous basis, and represent a distinctly late modern sphere in which social capital can be accrued and displayed, while enabling users to construct a separate yet equal identity in an online environment. Facebook can be viewed as the archetype for online social networking; while it was not the first website of its kind, Facebook’s popularity has far exceeded that of its antecedents to become the most popular social networking site in the world<sup>1</sup>. Such is the popularity of the site that the word ‘facebook’ has attained unofficial status as a verb in its own right: “[it] has been in the Merriam-Webster’s Open Dictionary for years: (verb). It means checking out your Facebook.com profile...I was facebooking my friends [*sic*] profiles” (Janisch 2009).

Numerous studies of online social networking have been carried out, with many using Facebook as a ready source of data; such is the nature of the site that population samples comprising large numbers of interconnected

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<sup>1</sup> Based on data from [www.ebizmba.com](http://www.ebizmba.com) of the 15 most popular social networking sites in March 2013.

users are relatively easy to access. Kirsty Young's investigation of adult users of Facebook, which sought to determine how they utilize the site and its various tools to engage socially with other users, was based on a sample of 75 people, eighteen of whom were selected to take part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews with supplementary verbal protocols. While the study was undeniably skewed in terms of gender, with a three-to-one ratio of female respondents, the scope of ages was relatively extensive, ranging from 21 to 57 years. Young concluded that, "Facebook is used to engage socially by making and maintaining contact with known persons and is particularly valued for its economic value and convenience" (2011:23). Her qualitative data revealed a confidence in Facebook as an economic tool that is used to maintain both strong and weak social ties, economical in the sense that participants revealed that they valued Facebook as an inexpensive and easy tool for staying in contact, while it made minimal demands in terms of time and monetary outlay. Close friendships are strengthened while tenuous yet definite contact can be maintained with distant acquaintances. Users spoke of Facebook's suite of tools in positive terms, highlighting the ability to post status updates, upload photographs, and utilize the 'event' function; in all of these cases, respondents claimed that the tools in question allowed them to strengthen their social ties. Young concluded that, "Facebook is used as a supplementary tool to communicate, it does not replace face-to-face or telephone activity" (2011:31). In a similar vein, Cheung *et al* attempted to narrow the perceived aperture in theory-based empirical research by focusing on university students' use of Facebook. Basing their research on the We-Intention paradigm, which measures the willingness of a social actor to

commit jointly an action with another party or parties, the researchers sought to determine the degree to which Facebook use was affected by the opinions and actions of users' peer groups. Among the hypotheses put forth in the study, Cheung *et al* posited that Facebook participation is influenced by the expectations of users' existing friends, and that higher levels of We-Intention will occur in the presence of powerful group norms, a strong social identity, and high levels of user self-discovery. Their research was based on a sample of 182 Facebook users, drawn from the student community by means of a questionnaire posted to several student-oriented Facebook groups. Once again, the sample was gender-biased in favour of female respondents by a ratio of approximately 2:1, seventy-five percent of who were aged between 19 and 23 years. As in Young's study, Cheung *et al* discovered that "most people use Facebook so as to get instant communication and connection with their friends" (2011:1340). The data suggest that, while social identity appears to be a relatively inert aspect within these networks, group norms play a significant role in Facebook use, indicating a need among users to conform to the expectations of like-minded peer groups. Notably, social presence proved to be the most important variable, suggesting that the perceived significance of other users in an online interaction is of considerable importance: "social presence has the strongest impact on We-Intention to use Facebook" (Cheung *et al* 2011:1340). Such data imply a certain commoditisation of the self at work among users of online social networks, wherein the approval on one's online peers can be both gained and lost, affecting one's levels of social capital. The term 'social capital,' borrowed from economic parlance for the purpose of analysing issues of human sociality, "has become one of the most

popular exports from sociological theory into everyday language” (Portes 1998:2). According to Kirsty Young, “[s]ocial capital is a sociological concept related to the connections between social networks” (2011:22). Pierre Bourdieu argued that, “the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world” (2004:15). As such, social capital may be regarded as a significant aspect of everyday human interaction. If this paradigm is then extrapolated to encompass Facebook use, a crude form of nominal social capital presents itself, namely by the amount of ‘friends’ a user has accrued. As Portes argues, “the most common function attributed to social capital is as a source of network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family.” (1998:12). Ellison *et al* suggest, “it is possible that new forms of social capital and relationship building will occur in online social network sites” (2007:1146). The function of social capital in online social networks is yet to be fully understood. It may be argued that on Facebook, one’s friend networks represent a kind of social capital that one can present to a wider audience: Greater numbers of friends may generate increased levels of popularity among one’s social connections, prompting the desire to accrue ever-larger reserves of such social capital. As such, the harvesting of friend connections may emerge as an important factor in the cultivation of the online self, which may in turn influence how individuals behave online.

In their 2006 study, Ellison *et al* hypothesised an inextricable connection between Facebook use and levels of bridging and bonding social capital. Among the sample of 286 undergraduate students, which was comprised predominantly of Caucasian females in their early 20s, it was found

that “that there is a positive relationship between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital” (Ellison *et al* 2007:1161). On average, the respondents had amassed between 150 and 200 Facebook friends, and each user spent approximately 10 hours a week on the site. Additionally, the study revealed a link between users’ self-esteem and their willingness to use Facebook: “[the] hypotheses, which predicted that the relationship between Facebook use and bridging social capital would vary based upon the degree of self-esteem and satisfaction with life, are supported” (Ellison *et al* 2007:1158).

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The above research reveals a basic need among users to preserve social ties, to increase levels of social capital, and to use the virtual tools at their disposal to both complement and underpin their online interactions. It may be of use to build on these analyses by investigating the degree to which Facebook affects the social lives of Irish users, with an eye to extracting a more gender-balanced sample of the population. Thus, the foregoing research has given rise to the following question areas:

- *Can online social networks be thought of as a distinctly late modern taxonomy of protocols, providing new ways for users to conduct their social lives?*
- *Has Facebook become an invaluable tool in the processes of self-presentation and reciprocity?*

## FACEBOOK: THE SOCIAL SELF ONLINE

Technology has enabled intimacy to traverse from the private sphere of personal, face-to-face friend networks, to the public domain of global online interaction. Binder *et al* assert that “[o]ffline networks are, in part, rebuilt online. This implies that Facebook profiles will list not only lasting and close friendships, or social acquaintances, but contacts of all kinds” (2009:966). While this offers a number of obvious benefits for maintaining connections with friends and loved ones, there may also be a negative aspect to such electronically mediated networks, with Binder *et al* arguing that “[t]he mechanisms designed to facilitate connectivity create new, unintended, problems that constrain the growth of personal networks” (2009:965). Facebook affords its users the ability to be authors of their own online guises, to construct and stage-manage a virtual analogue of their real-world biographies for an audience whose number may far exceed that of their real-world friend networks. As Sonia Livingstone argues, “[f]rom the user’s viewpoint, more than ever before, using media means creating as well as receiving, with user control extending far beyond selecting ready-made, mass-produced content” (2008:394). This in turn has implications for privacy, with Houghton and Joinson arguing that “[w]hile the underlying concept of privacy is not new, modern technological advancements have meant that privacy concerns have evolved” (2010:76). On the other hand, data uncovered by Nosko *et al* suggest that Facebook users “are demonstrating some discretion regarding what kinds of revealing information they are willing to share” (2009:408).

By its very nature, online social networking presents a unique set of challenges when considering issues of privacy and risk, since every action taken online leaves a digital footprint<sup>2</sup>, with the implication that all user content is potentially accessible and therefore retrievable. Karen Spärck Jones suggests that “[t]he important point about modern technology is that it makes it possible to capture much more transient, fine-grained data about events and states and their sequence in time...and to record it so that it can be searched” (2003:3). Consequently, argue Houghton and Joinson, “with users creating much of the content of Web 2.0, it is increasingly important for users to realize the nature of boundaries, possible violations, and the importance of ownership of information” (2010:84). Facebook, which facilitates the sharing of personal information, exposes users to risk insofar as personal details immediately acquire a degree of permanence as soon as they become uploaded. It has been suggested that suggest, “[d]ue to the variety and richness of personal information disclosed in Facebook profiles...users may put themselves at risk for a variety of attacks on their physical and online persona” (Gross and Acquisti, sec.4).

Livingstone’s 2008 study investigated social media use, particularly with regard to online identity construction, and the management of risk and opportunity among young teenage users of various online SNSs, and consisted of a series of open-ended interviews with adolescent social media users, which were conducted in their own homes. The sample, while relatively small at n=16, was gender balanced and included individuals from mixed ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Livingstone argues that the mass

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<sup>2</sup> “a digital footprint is the word used to describe the trail, traces or ‘footprints’ that people leave online.” Definition taken from [http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/digital\\_footprint.html](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/digital_footprint.html)

media have perpetuated an anxiety about standards of Internet behaviour among young people, particularly with regard to perceived predatory threats: “it seems that even normatively valued online activities are correlated in practice with risky activities regarding online content, contact and conduct” (2008:397). While risk-taking has always been a part of adolescence, Livingstone asserts that teenagers today enjoy something of an extended youth, in which greater levels of independence are attained at ever-younger ages. In late modernity, teenagers are capable of carrying out the task of identity-creation simultaneously in both the offline and online worlds. While the representations of self that were uncovered by her study varied greatly, Young concluded that “for today’s teenagers, self-actualization increasingly includes a careful negotiation between the opportunities...and risks...afforded by internet-mediated communication” (2008:407).

Therefore, risk, and the perceived opportunities it can afford, is an issue ripe for examination as the evolution of Web 2.0<sup>3</sup> technologies enhances the ways in which social actors can perform the self in cyberspace. Sonja Grabner-Kräuter argues that “[e]vidence from many OSNs indicates that millions of social network users...do not hesitate to share their thoughts, experiences, images, files, videos and links in an environment that is largely devoid of security standards and practices” (2009:506). Grabner-Kräuter set out to understand the repercussions of this burgeoning digital environment on the processes of trust that are enacted among online social network users. Significantly, her research is based on the assumption that value is a primary incentive for individuals to use sites like Facebook; users participate in online

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<sup>3</sup> Term describing the second generation of the Internet, whose suite of features includes blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. Definition found at <http://www.techterms.com/definition/web20>.

group activity on the supposition that a return of some kind will be forthcoming. Hence, she posits that levels of trust amongst users will vary depending on the strength of their social ties: The weaker the social tie, the more fragile the support network is likely to be. Conversely, high levels of trust among users with strong social ties should result in the mutual exchange of emotional support and companionship. The methodology involved focus groups with a sample of n=21 users of various online SNSs, including Facebook. As with similar studies, the Facebook users interviewed were predominantly female and ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. Grabner-Kräuter concluded that “the relationship between social capital and trust is not unidirectional but reciprocal” (2009:518). Such reciprocity is sociologically interesting, since “[t]he need to control the flow of personal information to different types of relationship tie is central to our social world” (Houghton and Joinson 2010:78). A study by Houghton and Joinson on privacy in online social networks suggests a fragmentation of online friendship, with respondents reporting the existence of different friend types, which varied based on the nature of the relationship. Yet the bigger picture appears not so clear-cut: “[i]n online interaction, such as a SNS, the distinction between who is able to see, obtain, and use various bits of our data or image becomes blurred” (Houghton and Joinson 2010:78). This blurring has implications for trust, with some arguing that “[t]he mechanisms designed to facilitate connectivity create new, unintended, problems that constrain the growth of personal networks” (Binder *et al* 2009:965). Houghton and Joinson’s investigation drew a limited, opportunistic sample of n=8 users of online SNSs, 5 of whom were female, and whose ages ranged from 23 to 32 years. Their data reveal that online

transgressions normally elicit a negative emotional reaction, specifically centred on the loss of control, thus implying an expectation among users that boundaries of privacy should exist on online SNSs. Additionally, the immediacy and ease with which data can be uploaded to Facebook facilitates, in some cases, the blithe posting of information without adequate consideration being given to its wider impact. Houghton and Joinson conclude that “[t]he cumulative nature of social spheres, or relationship types, under the ‘friends’ umbrella in SNS works only to amplify [privacy] issues” (2010:80). It can thus be inferred that privacy concerns surface within online SNSs because content can traverse from one social sphere to another, aided by the immediacy of online communication. In turn, tension emerges, meaning that the integrity of online SNSs is negatively affected by “the need to maintain independent social spheres” (Binder *et al* 2009:966). Indeed, data have come forth suggesting that tension is more likely to occur in online rather than offline environments. Binder *et al* argue that online SNSs represent a space that lacks clearly defined boundaries: “[d]ue to the highly visible communications encouraged by SNS, social exchanges between users sometimes have negative consequences beyond their intended audience” (2009:965).

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As this data have shown, the many positive aspects of online SNSs may be countered by a number of concerns, primarily around issues of privacy and trust, which go hand in hand with maintaining an online presence. As before, a more gender-balanced sample could potentially contribute to current research in this regard. Thus, the following question areas emerge:

- *To what extent has Facebook changed the ways in which users live their social lives?*
- *How do Facebook users perceive issues of risk online?*
- *Is there a distinguishable difference between online and offline friendships?*

## **2.4 FACEBOOK BEHAVIOUR: DISCLOSURE & REFLEXIVITY**

Of particular interest to this study is the impact of online social network use on reflexivity and users' sense of self, and the ways in which the self is presented to a wider audience. The reflexive self has often been regarded as one of the distinctive markers of a post-modern society; the autonomy of social actors has been highlighted as an inevitable side effect of humanity's waning trust in the traditional societal structures that were cohesive aspects of early modernity. From a sociological point of view, it is pertinent to regard Facebook as simply another layer of social space, an electronically mediated sphere governed by a set of protocols that influence users' behaviour. As Zeynep Tufekci argues, "[i]n technologically mediated sociality, being seen by those we wish to be seen by...and thereby engaging in identity expression, communication and impression management are central motivations" (2008:21). Online SNSs necessarily increase the number of people with whom their users can communicate, whether it be a direct, intentional message to a close social tie, or a general communiqué sent to one's entire network of online contacts. Indeed, a study carried out by Adam Acar reveals that "an average Facebook user was found to have 217 network members - more than one-and-a-half times the number expected in real life" (2008:77).

As a result, “[w]ith online social networking, the lines blur between the personal and professional, simply because one's audience is often made up of people from various parts of one's life” (Farkas 2009:35). It would appear that as well as increasing the size of users' social networks, sites such as Facebook are instigating a renegotiation of the social self by blurring traditional boundaries of interaction between users, representing a significant paradigm shift in the way people communicate with one another. Facebook, for example, allows users to comment on each other's profiles, thereby facilitating the creation of a digitised textual record of a particular interaction, which has the potential to be revisited many times by members of a user's online social network. This may prove problematic since, in many instances, “individuals' online social network size is significantly bigger than their real life social network size” (Acar 2008:74). This is echoed by Tong *et al*, who propose that “research on traditional social networks suggests that the number of people with whom an individual maintains close relationships is about 10-20...and the total number of social relationships people manage may be around 150” (2008:532). This disparity between close and weak ties is necessarily reinforced on Facebook, wherein weak and strong social ties exist side-by-side within a user's network of ‘friends.’ As Acar argues, “online social networks are not only larger than regular social networks but also structurally different since they are not highly influenced by some demographic factors” (2008:77). This broadening of one's social network, facilitated by technology such as Facebook, has necessarily increased the number of people with whom we can make connections; as Sun and Wu argue, “[w]hile SNS might not increase the number of strong ties that people

have, the SNS technology supports the formation and maintenance of weak ties, increasing the bridging social capital of its users” (2012:431). This is significant since “the number of friends one has on Facebook can prove to be a significant cue by which individuals make social judgments about others in an online social network” (Tong *et al* 2008:545).

In their 2008 study, Tong *et al* sought to determine if a link could be drawn between the number of friends a user has accrued on Facebook, and the impressions that other users would form of them, based on information that they choose to display on their profile. The investigation polled 153 undergraduate students via an online questionnaire, of which a useable sample of n=132 was extracted. Participants were required to view mock-ups of various random Facebook profiles, before completing an online questionnaire, which asked them to disclose their personal impressions of the users whose profiles they had perused. The study drew participants from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and achieved a high degree of gender balance, with a slight leaning toward female respondents at 53%. Tong *et al* posited that “there may be an upper limit on the extent to which individuals can credulously support even superficial relationships, and claims exceeding that limit...backfire on successful impression management” (2008:533). They found that, while there was no discernable link between the number of Facebook friends a user displayed and their perceived physical attractiveness, respondents regarded those with circa 300 friends to be more socially attractive than those with either more or less than that number. As such, they conclude that “having an exceedingly large number of friends leads to judgments that profile owners are not sociable and outgoing, but are

relatively more introverted” (Tong *et al* 2008:542). Similarly, Sun and Wu argue that “those who are introverted may feel less inhibited about self disclosure in the online environment” (2012:430). In his 2008 study, Adam Acar set out to determine the consequences of participating in online SNSs. Acar speculated that there is a considerable difference between the size of online and offline social networks; moreover, he posited that gender and perceived levels of extrovert behaviour could predict both the size of online social networks, and the amount of time users spend on them. His study employed a survey via an online questionnaire that polled 451 respondents, 427 of which disclosed that they had a profile on Facebook. Once again, a high degree of gender balance was achieved, with 223 male and 228 female participants, many of whom indicated that they were members of more than one online SNS. The data revealed that women tend to both receive and accept more friendship requests than men: “[f]emales indicated that they've been ‘poked’...significantly more than males...and have a higher percentage of strangers in their online networks” (Acar 2008:77). Such findings may indicate a gendering of trust in online interactions, wherein female SNS users are more likely to extend themselves to individuals with whom they have little or no bridging social capital. Acar’s study also incorporated issues of self-esteem and concluded that “[p]eople with high self-esteem were reluctant to add new members into their network unless they really know them” (2008:78).

Using as their theoretical framework Mowen’s Meta-theoretic Model of Motivation (3M model), which posits that personality traits play a significant role in user behaviour, Sun and Wu set out to investigate the degree to which self-presentation can be modified on Facebook. Specifically, they argue that

“three factors affect Facebook self-presentation through the following situational traits that are more specific to the online context: public self-consciousness online, institution-based trust in Internet, and Internet self efficacy” (Sun and Wu 2012:422). The study consisted of an online survey, which generated a convenience sample of 254 American college students from northern New England and Southern California, all of whom had a Facebook profile. The average age was 22, and the sample was heavily gender imbalanced with 73% female respondents. They found that the perceived ability of users to alter the way in which they presented themselves online was primarily based on four main factors: “Facebook self-presentation was directly influenced by...public self-consciousness online, institution-based trust in Internet...Internet self-efficacy [and] agreeableness” (Sun and Wu 2012:430). Interestingly, the data show that the more trust users have in the structures that facilitate the maintenance of their Facebook profile, the more confident they would feel in modifying their online selves. On the other hand, Sun and Wu suggest that “membership of certain online communities mirrors people’s social networks in their everyday lives” (2012:430).

These studies show that online interaction has significantly altered how sociality is performed in late modernity. Indeed, since sites such as Facebook act as a digital proxy of one’s physical biography, a new organization of rules must necessarily follow in their wake. For instance, users must navigate a new set of social mores when they agree to place their lives on the global stage that is their Facebook profile, and expose themselves to judgement and potential ridicule by both intimate ties and strangers alike. While the latter group may be perceived by some to be of little personal consequence, certain

risks have emerged wherein potential employers have begun to investigate online SNS profiles, ostensibly engaging in rapid and inexpensive background checks of future employees. Such behaviour is obviously problematic and ethically suspect: “[t]here appears to be a disconnect between how users of SNSs view the purpose and utility of SNSs and how employers view the sites” (Clark and Roberts 2010:519). They suggest that a certain degree of ambivalence has emerged with regard to this practice, in which “future employees expect employers to check online for information available about them. Many employers also believe that this is an acceptable practice” (Clark and Roberts 2010:508). The crux of their argument rests on the assertion that this surreptitious blurring of the public/private boundary afforded by online SNSs is inherently detrimental to society as a whole, in that it violates traditional and accepted boundaries of privacy. As Binder *et al* argue that “the increased visibility of communication in SNS, or similar social media, may lead directly to increased levels of social tension” (2009:966). Such social tension may seep outward to the physical world, negatively affecting users’ potential employability. Clark and Roberts suggest that “the current practice of unfettered checks further destroys a line between what is appropriate for the work realm and what should exist in one’s private realm” (2010:518). As a consequence of these risks, online interaction and self-presentation has necessitated a reengagement with the etiquette of sociality.

In attempting to understand how the world of online social networking can be successfully navigated by the average user, Mary Holmes attempted a hermeneutic study of ‘netiquette’ advice. Put simply, the existence of such advice on online manners “indicates the need for people to employ reflexivity

in everyday relating to others” (Holmes, 2011, no page number given). Her study involved searching through various online etiquette sites between December 2008 and March 2009. A random selection of sites was chosen via Google, which eventually yielded as sample of n=45, most of which were blogs. Facebook’s trans-national nature and growing popularity lends itself well to a discussion on Internet manners, since it is essentially a melting pot for a myriad of disparate cultures and sensibilities. The study concludes that “[o]nline friends should consider each other’s feelings in the same way as offline, and although emotional closeness is encouraged with ‘real’ friends, where there are status differences more cautious self-expression is advised” (Holmes 2011). Essentially, there is a growing tendency among online SNS users to become increasingly reflexive in their interactions; indeed, Holmes’ study revealed that such reflexivity is actively encouraged within online communities.

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Online SNSs facilitate the accretion of ever-larger numbers of people with whom one can connect. This diffusion of the online self brings with it a host of new challenges that must be negotiated, prompting a change in the rules of engagement within late modernity. Thus, the following questions arise:

- *To what extent is social behaviour affected by online interaction?*
- *Is the online self exposed to new forms of risk?*
- *Is the online self regarded as an entity that is worth protecting?*

The research for this study focused on how online SNS users interact with Facebook as a material artefact, and the degree to which they felt it has affected their lives. This formed the basis of a project that sought understand the online social actor as a manifestly late modern entity, capable of using the platform provided by Internet technology to create and cultivate multiple versions of itself. Online SNSs represent a special case of this technological revolution because individuals now have the opportunity to construct a space in which their online selves can take shape and evolve, perhaps producing a digital biography that is as valid and valued as one's physical life. The literature reviewed thus far has shown that, to accomplish this digital replication and/or alteration, the online self has become familiar with a new set of tools with which to communicate, react, and effectively destabilise the accepted boundaries of public/private interaction. To extend this body of research, this project will attempt to discover the degree to which the amorphous nature of late modern sociality is replicated and reinforced by online SNSs, particularly Facebook. Is it accurate to assert that liquid modernity is reflected by the online self?

The sample on which the research is based was drawn from individuals who used online SNSs, primarily Facebook. The decision was taken to use Facebook as a sampling frame since it is by far the most popular online social networking utility, as mentioned previously in this paper. A number of methodological choices were possible for the purposes of collecting data for

this study, which fall into two main categories: Qualitative and Quantitative research methods. According to Schutt, quantitative methods take the form of survey data and experiments: “[d]ata that are treated as quantitative are either numbers or attributes that can be ordered in terms of magnitude” (2009:17). Surveys have the advantage of being relatively easy to implement, particularly in an online setting, which necessarily increases the potential number of respondents. On the other hand, qualitative methods can also be effective: “participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups...are designed to capture social life as participants experience it” (Schutt 2009). In-depth, semi-structured interviews have the advantage of allowing the interviewer more intimate access with respondents, as well as the ability to augment the line of questioning to elicit a more detailed reply. For this project, a survey instrument was initially deemed the most appropriate means of gathering data, due to its relevant ease of construction and distribution. I subsequently decided that semi structured interviews would provide the basis for a more detailed analysis, but returned to the idea of deploying an online survey toward the end of the literature review process, since a wider sample of the online population could be captured with this method.

As such, I resolved to employ an online survey instrument consisting of 23 questions using software provided by [www.kwiksurvey.com](http://www.kwiksurvey.com), in hopes of reaching as many Facebook users as possible. Sixteen of the questions took the form of a statement enclosed within quotation marks, with which respondents were required to rank their level of agreement on a sliding scale from ‘Strongly agree’ to ‘Strongly disagree.’ Two of the questions asked respondents to rank the importance of Facebook to their social life as a whole,

and the importance of trust within online social networks, using a sliding scale from 'Extremely important' to 'Not important at all.' Respondents were also asked to divulge their age, gender, number of Facebook friends, and the frequency of their Facebook use. An additional question required participants to consider the action they would take if they encountered inappropriate behaviour on Facebook; this question provided respondents with a series of possibilities, from which one could be chosen. The survey instrument can be found in the Appendix section of this document. A convenience sample was then drawn from a large pool of potential respondents; in order to achieve some degree of triangulation, I decided to construct a small focus group with a view to gaining a more in-depth analysis, and to supplement the data discovered by the survey instrument. The focus group was to consist of 3 to 4 individuals, male and female, who had taken part in the online survey, and whose further input could elucidate some of the survey findings. These sessions were to be recorded using the voice recorder facility on a Samsung Galaxy Mini mobile telephone, and transcribed at a later date.

Ontologically oriented within the objectivist paradigm, quantitative surveys are advantageous since they have the potential to reach a wider sample and are less labour intensive than semi-structured interviews. When speaking of a deductive approach to research, Schutt suggests that “[w]hen we conduct social research, we are attempting to connect theory with empirical data...[r]esearchers may make this connection by starting with a social theory and then testing some of its implications with data” (2009:40). Conversely, an inductive approach in the form of qualitative interviews can allow for the formation of new theories about the social world: “[i]n contrast to

deductive research, inductive research begins with specific data, which are then used to develop (induce) a general explanation” (Schutt 2009). Thus, the potential for uncovering some previously undocumented social phenomena necessarily increase when face-to-face interviews are employed, since lived experience is delivered verbatim, as understood by the participants themselves. However, respondents in an interview situation may feel compelled to impart information that they think the researcher wants to hear, or to suppress honest answers in favour of a more tailored response, particularly if they feel that such information would cast them in a poor light. Such eventualities must be borne in mind when embarking on qualitative study. Eventually, a blending of structured quantitative data and unstructured qualitative data was deemed appropriate in order to provide a more rigorous analytical framework within which to interpret the findings. As Schutt suggests, “[c]onducting qualitative interviews can often enhance the value of a research design that uses primarily quantitative measurement techniques” (2009:347).

Since I do not operate a Facebook profile of my own, a link to the survey was then e-mailed to a number of my contacts, who were in turn asked to send it to a number of their contacts, some of whom posted the link on their own Facebook profiles. Moodle was also utilized to contact a number of fellow students seeking their participation in the study. Participation in both the survey and the focus groups was voluntary, and respondents were made aware that their data would form the basis for a study on Facebook behaviour. Express written permission to use their qualitative data in the study was granted by the focus group participants. Their names and any other identifiable characteristics (save for age and gender) were changed within the

findings section of this research. A copy of the informed consent form that they were asked to sign is included the Appendix of this thesis.

According the Sociological Association of Ireland, "[s]ociologists, when they carry out research, enter into personal and moral relationships with those they study, be they individuals, households, corporate entities or other social groups...They should strive to protect the interests of research participants, their sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting concerns" ("Ethical Guidelines" 2013). Ethical issues did not prove to be a significant problem in this instance since the online survey was entirely anonymized, and the questions it contained were carefully constructed in order to be as probing as possible without asking the respondent to divulge information that could be viewed as possibly harmful or embarrassing. The face-to-face interviews necessarily removed the anonymity of online participation, but care was taken to seek the respondents' express permission to use their oral records as supplementary material in this study. Additionally, the questions formulated for the focus group interviews centred on participants' own Facebook practices and their attitudes to certain online behaviours, and sought to avoid soliciting personal details beyond what was deemed absolutely necessary. The quantitative survey data were then collated for processing and analysis using software provided by *kwiksurvey.com*, with a view to gaining a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. The aural record of the focus group interview was transcribed within two days of the event, and preserved in textual form using Microsoft Word. This transcription is also included in the Appendix of this document. Additionally, all participants shall be given the opportunity to access the

findings uncovered by this study upon its completion, should they wish to do so.

The quantitative data collection proved relatively easy to carry out; within a week of distributing the link online, 40 respondents had taken part in the survey. However, a problem did arise with this aspect of the research with regard to generalizing the data that was collected. Schutt defines sample generalizability as “the ability to generalize from a sample, or subset, of a larger population to that population itself” (2009:51). Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to determine the total number of potential respondents who could have potentially received the link to the survey, because other resources such as Facebook were used to promote and distribute the link. This renders the sample generalizability quite difficult to determine. Furthermore, the *kwiksurvey* software precluded the inclusion of a comment box into which respondents could provide additional information; this proved slightly problematic only in one instance: A question that required participants to choose from a predetermined list of possible responses. Additionally, I encountered a serious problem in attempting to carry out the mixed-gendered focus group: Illness precluded two of the three voluntary participants from taking part, meaning that the interview sessions had to be forsaken. However, a smaller focus group consisting of two female participants was assembled within a week of the aborted initial attempt, and the interviews were eventually carried out at the participants’ convenience in a classroom on NUIM’s north campus.

Of principal concern in this study was to discover the ways in which Facebook is shaping the formation of the social self in an online environment. Adam Acar suggests that “online social networks allow their users to connect with people who have common interests while giving them power to be independent communicators” (2008:63). The power of which Acar speaks is facilitated through the structures of online SNSs, meaning that the degree to which the online self can be fashioned is largely dependent on the manner in which social actors interact and manipulate the virtual tools at their disposal. Once these tools have been mastered, online relationship networks can then be constructed and maintained. As Tong *et al* argue, “the size of one’s network is the behavioral residue of the way one accrues one’s associations online” (2008:537). Once the social actor has been implanted within the virtual environment, they are necessarily subject to the rules of engagement by which that environment is governed. Research on Facebook etiquette found that “[w]hat is felt as a breach of manners sufficient to defriend will differ according to the situation and the shifting etiquette by which various groups guide their interactions” (Holmes 2011).

**4.1****FACEBOOK AND THE VIRTUALITY OF THE SELF**

The online survey yielded 40 respondents, and was relatively gender balanced, with a split of 55% female to 45% male. The majority of respondents (40%) revealed that they spend less than an hour a day on

Facebook, while 35% disclosed that they had between 0 and 100 Facebook friends; most participants (35%) were aged between 18 and 24 years. In order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the relationship that individuals have with Facebook, the online survey was segmented into three main areas of questioning. The first area sought to establish whether Facebook could be regarded as a new set of protocols that social actors could utilize for the performance of self. To the statement "*I found it easy to learn how to use Facebook,*" 95% responded in the affirmative. The vast majority of respondents (90%) declared that they were reluctant "*to upload as much information as possible about [their life] to Facebook.*" Such hesitance is reflective of the broader body of literature on this issue; regarding their own study, Nosko *et al* suggest that "on average, people were choosing to display approximately 25% of possible information for other users to view. This clearly indicates either a reticence to invest heavily in developing online profiles, or active decisions to limit disclosure" (2009:408). When presented with the statement: "*I think Facebook is useful in allowing me to create an online identity,*" a majority (40%) responded that they strongly disagreed, while 30% agreed, and 25% claimed that they neither agreed nor disagreed. Similarly, the question "*How important do you feel Facebook is to your social life?*" drew responses that showed a relatively high degree of ambivalence: 40% revealed that it was neither important nor unimportant to their social life, while 30% considered it to be important, and 20% thought it not important at all. Tufekci argues that "[i]ncreasing portions of our social, communicative, and commercial acts now take place in this digital world of effortless, habitual, involuntary persistence" (2008:21). When speaking of Bordieu's theory of

habitus, Omar Lizardo asserts that “habitus is itself a generative dynamic structure that adapts and accommodates itself to another dynamic mesolevel [sic] structure composed primarily of other actors, situated practices and durable institutions” (2009:4). If we regard Facebook in this instance as a meso-level structure within the lives of its users, then respondents’ apparent rejection of it as a tool for identity creation, coupled with their assertion that it holds little influence over their social lives, may indicate the emergence of a type of digital habitus in which virtual interaction is not regarded as a necessary aspect of actors’ broader biographies, but something that has become habitual, a gradual progression of life from the physical to the quasi-virtual. This is reflected by data collected in the focus group; when asked why they had created a profile on Facebook, participant ‘A’ declared:

*“Probably because everybody was doing it, I’d imagine. So, to some extent it was a natural progression from Bebo. Bebo started when I was in secondary school and it was the big thing, then Facebook was, I guess, the natural progression, the cooler one, more up to date.”*

On the other hand, it may be the case that Facebook has achieved a kind of omnipresence, prompting users to see it as a logical extension of their everyday lives, whether they wish to acknowledge its influence or not.

However, an interesting contradiction emerged from analysis of the data: when asked to respond to the statement “*I feel that Facebook is useful in allowing me to display aspects of my personality,*” 55% responded in the affirmative, while a further 50% reported that they would miss their Facebook profile if they were denied access to it for a prolonged length of time. So users

appear keen to reject the idea of Facebook as a controlling influence in their social lives, while simultaneously embracing it as a means of displaying their personalities. Indeed, 50% confirmed that their Facebook profile is an aspect of their lives that is worth protecting. Hence, rather than provide a tool for self-creation, these data suggest that online social networks act more as a touchstone of connectivity, providing users with easy access to the matrix of ties that make up the fabric of their social worlds. The nebulous definition of the word 'friend' may lie at the heart of this: "[i]t is important to note that 'friend' in a social network site is not synonymous with 'friend' as it is generally understood, but there is some overlap between the concepts" (Tufekci 2008:23).

## 4.2

## FACEBOOK AND RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS

The online survey data revealed that 55% of respondents believed that Facebook has become an invaluable tool in helping them to maintain their relationships with people. Tong *et al* argue that "the size of one's apparent friend network on a system such as Facebook can easily become much larger than traditional offline networks...because the technology facilitates greater connection...and because social norms inhibit refusals to friend requests" (2008:538). Tong's assertion is significant with regard to this study. During the focus group interview, when asked if they believed that individuals feel compelled to accept friend requests on Facebook, participant 'A' replied:

*"To some degree, they do. Because, say for a few of my college assignments, we set up groups on Facebook because it's easier to keep in contact with people rather than e-mail and stuff. It's quite handy."*

*But then you set the group and people add you as friends and you can't really say no because we're in a group and they're going to see because we're in a group that we're not friends with each other."*

When asked to consider the statement: *"I think that the relationships I have with people on Facebook are as important to me as the relationships I have with people in the offline world,"* 65% of the online survey participants indicated that they strongly disagreed, while only 10% specified that they agreed. Such data indicate a blurring of social boundaries in online SNSs; the ambiguous nature of the word 'friend,' as discussed above, may be prompting a redefinition of online social space, rendering it a grey area in which protocols of interaction need to be renegotiated. This in turn has implications for privacy, as discovered by Houghton and Joinson, who argue that "different boundaries exist around different types of friend or tie, and that privacy issues are ubiquitous with online SNS use" (2010:90). The apparent ability of Facebook to facilitate privacy transgressions was evident from the focus group data. When discussing the 'check-in' feature - an application that allows users to disclose their precise location on their Facebook profile - participant 'B' declared:

*"Yeah, people check themselves in all the time, like when they're at home. And they could be home alone... That's seriously dangerous."*

Both respondents then confirmed that this application was their least favourite feature of Facebook, with respondent 'A' highlighting the potential for its accidental misuse:

*"You don't have to use it, obviously. But it's so easy to use it by accident, especially if you're using it on your phone."*

As Tufekci asserts, “[i]nformation technology erodes privacy in novel ways, connected to its key distinguishing features of persistence, searchability and cross-indexability” (2008:20). Privacy issues notwithstanding, the data show that trust proved to be a divisive issue among the online survey respondents; while 30% regarded trust as an important aspect of Facebook relationships, 35% believed it to be “not important at all,” and when presented with the statement: *“I trust each one of my Facebook friends equally,”* 60% indicated that they strongly disagreed. While 80% of survey respondents revealed that the relationships they had cultivated on Facebook were not as important to them as those in the offline world, the qualitative data revealed a need to remain connected to this virtual network:

*“It’s constantly open. So, yeah, [I’m] definitely addicted to it. But, I wouldn’t be interested in the games part of it. Like it’s a big thing, we don’t even have a TV in our house [on campus], but Facebook is on constantly.”*

**- Participant ‘B’**

Cumulatively, 50% of the survey respondents disagreed with the supposition: *“I think that being on Facebook has positively affected my relationships with people in the offline world.”* This may suggest that Facebook is relatively inert in terms of influencing user behaviour in the wider physical world, perhaps underpinning afore mentioned data that suggest certain ambivalence among users regarding Facebook’s position in their social lives. Therefore, it may be pertinent to regard Facebook primarily as a tool with which to maintain one’s social ties, due mostly to its ease of use and the speed with which users can communicate:

*Facebook is just easier, it's quicker, do you know what I mean? In two sentences you have what you want to say, and it's done.*

- Participant 'B'

Hence, while Facebook represents a paradigm shift in terms of the way relationships are enacted in late modernity, it also calls upon social actors to enact new rules of engagement, some of which may lead to a renegotiation of issues such as privacy and trust.

### THE AFFECT OF FACEBOOK ON USER BEHAVIOUR

The data uncovered thus far appear to indicate that Facebook is something of a closed system, in which online behavioural norms are impeded from seeping outward into the physical world. The third area of investigation within the survey section of the research sought to discern how social actors behave when using Facebook, and to gauge their opinions on Facebook behaviour in general. 55% of respondents declared that they disagreed with the statement "*I believe that being on Facebook has changed the way I behave in my everyday life.*" Yet Tufekci argues that "one cannot present an online persona without manifesting a certain level of self-definition" (2008:33). In other words, the milieu offered by online SNSs necessarily requires users to consider the nature of their behaviour. While users appear to regard Facebook as a separate sphere, whose norms of behaviour have yet to transcend online boundaries, they also espouse a degree of reflexivity about how one should conduct oneself when online. For the statement "*I always consider the consequences of my actions before I post anything on Facebook,*" 60% of respondents chose to agree, while a further 25% indicated

that they strongly agreed. A negative backlash from fellow users may be a corollary of not considering the consequences of one's online actions. The focus group participants were asked to disclose the circumstances under which they would choose to unfriend someone. While "annoying" behaviour was deemed the most obvious reason to delete a fellow user from one's friend network, the practice of editing one's contacts also presented itself:

*"About a year ago, I went through my friends, and was like, 'This is ridiculous, I'm getting rid of all these people.' A lot of them are from school and stuff so what's the point, like?"*

- Participant 'A'

This notion of expunging redundant contacts may be symptomatic of a reflexive need by users not to appear over-zealous when accumulating Facebook friends. As Tong *et al* argue, "an abnormally high friend count may fuel the inference that the profile owner spends more time superficially friending others beyond a plausible extent" (2008:538). Those who took part in the online survey were asked to divulge what action they would take in the event that another user posted inappropriate content on their profile. The vast majority (70%) indicated that they would simply delete the offensive post. Interestingly, no respondent declared that electing to make a formal complaint to the relevant authorities would be an appropriate action to take in such an event, which would appear to suggest a degree of autonomy and self-reliance at work among Facebook users. The majority of respondents (40%) revealed that they would feel the need to take action if they encountered inappropriate behaviour, yet 35% declared that they were unsure. This disparity is both intriguing and perplexing. In terms of reflexivity, "[t]he relational complexity

partly evidenced by social networking etiquette is particularly characterized by expanded definitions of friendship...which require emotional reflexivity” (Holmes, par. 2.5). Once again, it appears that the redefinition of the word ‘friend’ as a catchall term for both strong and weak ties on Facebook is causing users to re-examine their understanding of behavioural norms. Since friend networks on Facebook are comprised of social ties of varying strengths, there may be a reticence in extending oneself authoritatively when confronted with improper behaviour for fear of overstepping vague, yet ever-present, online social boundaries.

A slight disparity of answers emerged with regard to two of the survey questions, each of which received almost the same number of responses indicating agreement as disagreement. The first of these, *“I would have to know someone very well before I became friends with them on Facebook,”* elicited the following data: 30% chose “I agree,” 35% chose “I disagree,” and 25% declared that they neither agreed nor disagreed. In order to understand this, the focus group participants were asked if they could possibly shed light on the inconsistency. The data suggest a certain online mirroring of users’ offline social worlds, which tend to be populated by both close friends and weaker ties:

*“Well, there’s a lot of people that I’m friends with on Facebook that I wouldn’t say I know very well. I’ve met them a few times and I know that they’re nice people, so I don’t mind being friends with them on Facebook. There’s probably the same amount of people on Facebook that I would say I know very well than there is in real life.”*

- Participant ‘A’

Additionally, the notion of feeling obliged to accept friend requests was also encountered:

*“I think it’s what I said earlier about accepting people that I’ve only met once. But then, probably later on, I’ll unfriend them. Yeah, I wouldn’t have to know people that well, at all”.*

- Participant ‘B’

Binder *et al* suggest that “[t]he mechanisms designed to facilitate connectivity create new, unintended, problems that constrain the growth of personal networks” (2009:965). This assertion may be reflected by the above data; Facebook algorithms do not impose a hierarchical structure on friend networks, as would occur in the offline world, thereby allowing for the accumulation of countless numbers of nominal ‘friends.’ Rather than expanding their matrix of close social ties, users may find themselves linked digitally to several individuals who are effectively strangers. Interestingly, this phenomenon can extend to one’s familial ties:

*“There’s cousins that I’m friends with and I still wouldn’t consider myself to know very well. You’re going to add them as friends because you’re related to them. And you do know them but, they don’t know what I do and I don’t know what they do. I don’t really know them that well.”*

- Participant ‘A’

Another statement, *“In my experience, people behave on Facebook in the same way as they would in the offline world,”* was similarly deadlocked. When put to the participants in the focus group, data emerged suggesting that Facebook could be utilized as a platform for self-aggrandisement and

“bragging.” While the survey participants appeared unsure of their response to this issue, the focus group data unearthed the notion that the digital self can become a type of cipher through which an exaggerated offline biography could be enacted:

*“There’s a serious element of bragging on it. Like, I think it’s different for people online, they say things. You know, you wouldn’t necessarily be telling people that you met once or twice, ‘Oh, I’m going here at the weekend, or I’m going there, and here’s some pictures! These deadly pictures from where I’ve been!’ And put it on Facebook to show off to everybody.”*

- Participant ‘A’

Additionally, anxiety over image control was self-evident in the participants’ responses, as well as the recognition that Facebook could be used to facilitate interactions that would not normally occur in the offline world:

*“Sometimes, you know when you put up a photo and one of your friends comments on it, and they’re on your friends list, but you might not necessarily be very good friends with them, and they comment, you know ‘Oh, you look beautiful!’ All this sort of stuff. And, you’re like, ‘I would never have this conversation with you outside of Facebook!’”*

- Participant ‘B’

With regard to issues of risk, the impact of unflattering Facebook self-presentation on future job prospects was of particular concern:

*“Say for the likes of going for a job, anybody’s going to be looking at your Facebook because that’s what they can do. For the most part it’s readily available and it’s a way of getting more information on a*

*person, and I don't think people think about this. In that way, there's definitely a big risk."*

**- Participant 'A'**

This is proving to be of considerable concern to potential employees, as Clark and Roberts assert: "conversations are immortalized, and it is very easy for others to be voyeurs and make judgments based on social interactions" (2010:513).

Tufekci argues that "Facebook is sometimes perceived as a 'walled garden' because of [its] separation into distinct networks" (2008:22). In many instances, these walls can ring-fence certain behavioural norms, such as the need to add friends to one's network without giving due consideration to the nature of the relationship. The varied responses encountered in the online survey highlight certain contradictions with regard to how users enact friendships online, and the uncertainty surrounding the emerging social mores of online behaviour.

The purpose of this project was to investigate the degree to which online social networking has influenced the shaping of the social self in late modernity. My interest in this topic was piqued by literature I encountered during the course of attending the special topic classes, literature that suggested online identity was gradually becoming integral to users' sense of self. Coupled with this, I was intrigued by Zygmunt Bauman's idea of late modernity as being liquid and nebulous, in which traditional social boundaries attained a more complex, amorphous form. As such, the idea emerged to discover if these concepts could be tested in relation to one another. With this in mind, a number of questions were formulated with a view to gaining a better understanding of online SNSs. This was partly motivated by that fact that I have never operated a profile on an online social network. Consequently, this represented a layer of social space about which I knew very little, save for some cursory second hand information. The actual process of conducting the social research was at once challenging and illuminating. Conceptualising the topic was relatively simple, while formulating questions of appropriate analytical rigour was rather challenging. My experience in taking SO204A Survey Methods led me to the initial idea of employing a survey instrument, which was to be deployed to approximately 25-30 voluntary participants in hard-copy form. However, at an early stage in the research phase, I determined that face-to-face interviews had the potential to yield a more comprehensive body of data, so embarked on this methodology instead.

Eventually, at a late stage in the literature review process, I reverted to my initial decision to use a survey, but resolved to deploy it online via email and moodle contacts. To compliment this methodology, I determined that triangulation could be achieved via a small focus group of up to four participants.

The data unearthed by the project yielded some interesting results. Of particular significance is the revelation that many Facebook users do not consider the site as a space in which they can create and perform a sense of identity. On the other hand, Facebook users consider the site as an important platform from which to project aspects of their personality. Additionally, while respondents tended to dismiss the significance of Facebook as a presence within their social lives, the majority of users divulged that their Facebook self is an entity that is worth protecting. It could be argued that Facebook both strengthens and undermines the nature of friendship in late modernity. In the context of Facebook, the word 'friend' has taken on a different set of sociometric inferences; to become a 'friend' on Facebook is to become another digital node in an ever-expanding network of electronic connections, the companionate value of which becomes ever more difficult to discern the larger it becomes. This has repercussions for issues such as trust, which is the cornerstone of all intimate relationships in the physical world. In the emerging frontier of online social networking, trust is proving itself a difficult concept to pin down. Facebook users appear unsure of its importance in their online strategies, arguably as a result of the physical and psychological distance that Internet communication imposes on intimate interactions. The ambiguity surrounding the accrual of friends on Facebook can be situated

within Bauman's idea of liquid modernity, of social relationships characterised by indistinct and tenuous ties. Similarly, the contrasting responses regarding attitudes toward Facebook behaviour are possibly symptomatic of a renegotiation of the rules of online sociality, as individuals seek to cultivate and enact their online social selves.

In conclusion, the process of carrying out this pilot study was challenging and enjoyable in equal measure. It is my hope that the data discussed in this thesis will go some way to broadening the sociological understanding of online social network use and its affect on the social actor in late modernity.

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# **A***ppendix*

### **Copy of online survey instrument**

Participants were asked to select one response to each of the following:

1) ***What is your age?***

18 to 24

25 to 29

30 to 34

35 to 39

40 to 44

45 to 49

50+

2) ***What is your gender?***

Male

Female

3) ***Approximately how many Facebook friends do you have?***

0 to 100

101 to 200

201 to 300

301 to 400

401 to 500

500+

4) ***Approximately how much time would you spend on Facebook per day?***

More than 5 hours

4 to 5 hours

3 to 4 hours

2 to 3 hours

1 to 2 hours

Less than an hour

Don't know

**5) How important do you feel Facebook is to your social life? Please choose one of the following:**

Extremely important

Important

Neither important nor unimportant

Quite unimportant

Not important at all

Don't know

**6) In your opinion, how important is TRUST in Facebook relationships? Please choose one of the following:**

Extremely important

Important

Neither important nor unimportant

Quite unimportant

Not important at all

Don't know

**7) If somebody posted something that you felt was inappropriate on your Facebook wall, what action would you take? Please choose one of the following:**

Ignore it

Delete it

Retaliate (e.g. post something inappropriate in their wall)

Contact the poster and ask them to change their behaviour

Make a formal complaint to Facebook

Don't know

**8) "I think Facebook is useful in allowing me to create an online identity." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:**

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

**9) "I think it's important to upload as much information as possible about my life to Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:**

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

**10) "I found it easy to learn how to use Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:**

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

11) ***"I think Facebook has become an invaluable tool for helping me to maintain my relationships with people." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

12) ***"I feel that Facebook is useful in allowing me to display aspects of my personality." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

13) ***"I spend the majority of my free time on Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

14) ***"I trust each one of my Facebook friends equally." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

15) ***"I think that the relationships I have with people on Facebook are as important to me as the relationships I have with people in the offline world." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

16) ***"I would have to know someone very well before I became friends with them on Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

17) ***"I think that being on Facebook has positively affected my relationships with people in the offline world." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

18) ***"In my experience, people behave on Facebook in the same way as they would in the offline world." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

19) ***"I always consider the consequences of my actions before I post anything on Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

20) ***"I would feel the need to take action if I encountered inappropriate behaviour on Facebook." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

21) ***"I believe that being on Facebook has changed the way I behave in my everyday life." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

22) ***"I would miss Facebook if I didn't have access to it for an extended period of time." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:***

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

**23) "I feel that my Facebook profile is an aspect of my life that is worth protecting." Please choose one of the following in response to the above statement:**

I strongly agree

I agree

I neither agree nor disagree

I disagree

I strongly disagree

Don't know

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth  
Participant Consent Form**

This informed consent form is for users of online social networking sites who are being invited to participate in research entitled “How Do Online Social Networking Sites Affect the Shaping of the Social Self in Late Modernity? The Case of Facebook.”

**Investigator:** Derek Egan  
**Institution:** National University of Ireland, Maynooth  
**Project:** SO303 – Special Topic Thesis Study  
**Supervisor:** Dr Mary Corcoran

**Purpose of research:** Online social networking sites have become hugely popular in recent years. This investigation will attempt to understand how using sites such as Facebook is affecting users’ sense of self, and their attitudes to online behaviour. Additionally, I wish to understand how relationships are carried out online, and if they have been affected by exposure to online interaction. I seek your cooperation in this study in order to help me better understand this complex social phenomenon.

**Type of research:** This research will take the form of a small focus group, and will require you to answer questions about Facebook use.

**Duration:** The interview should take between 30 and 60 minutes to complete.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may chose to terminate the interview at any stage.

**Confidentiality:** All data will be treated in the strictest confidence, and your name and any distinguishing characteristics (apart from your age and gender) will be anonymized for the purposes of academic discussion.

**Risks:** There are no risks of any kind involved in this type of research.

**Benefits:** Upon completion of the study, you will be granted full access to any data that has been uncovered, in order that you may understand how your participation has contributed to the wider body of sociological literature on Facebook use.

**Consent:** I hereby confirm that I have read and understand fully the preceding information pertaining to my participation in this investigation. I understand that any information I provide may be used for the purposes of an academic project on online social network use, and I consent to take part in this study.

**Participant signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Transcript of Focus Group Interview.

**Date: April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.**

**Location: JHT4, John Hume Building, North Campus, NUIM.**

**Time: 12.00**

I met the participants at a prearranged time at the front entrance of the John Hume building on the North Campus of NUIM. After exchanging brief introductions, we made our way to classroom T4 on the building's second floor, which I had ensured would be free to use for the purpose of the focus group between the hours of 12:00 and 13:00. Myself and the participants, both female and in their early 20s, entered the room and seated ourselves on chairs near the rear wall. The informed consent forms were then distributed to the participants, which they were asked to read and sign before the interview began. Neither participant had any questions about the study, or reservations about taking part. I explained that I would record the session using audio software on my Samsung Galaxy Mini mobile telephone. After enquiring if the participants had any further questions, they responded that they did not, and the interview began.

*Note: In the following transcript, the interviewer's questions/responses appear in emboldened black text, the letters 'A' and 'B' stand in place of the name of each participant, and their responses are delineated by red and blue text respectively.*

**First of all, thanks very much for taking part. I have a few short questions I'd like to ask if that's okay.**

**A: That's fine.**

**B: No problem.**

**So, my first question is: Why did you create your Facebook profile?**

**A: Probably because everybody was doing it, I'd imagine. So, to some extent it was a natural progression from Bebo. Bebo started when I was in secondary school and it was the big thing, then Facebook was I guess the natural progression, the cooler one, more up to date, so I guess that was why.**

**Okay, and yourself, B?**

**B: Well, I guess it was because, well, my cousin lives in Poland, and he has family over there and he was on Facebook so it was kind of to keep in contact with him. So, I don't think there was Skype or anything here at the time he went over first, so I think for me, that's why I went on it.**

**So you would have preferred Facebook over, say, your phone?**

**B: Yeah, cause, like, it's free, you know.**

**Okay, sure! So, what does Facebook mean to you?**

A: That's kind of a tough one! I don't know, I guess it doesn't really mean an awful lot. I don't use it as much now as I used to. I've kind of gone passed the stage of using it all the time. I check stuff on it now but I don't really post stuff on it much 'cause I don't really see it as a kind of online identity for myself. I guess I kind of use it for...not even keeping in touch with people, just pure nosiness, like! Just seeing what's going on.

**So you would lurk more than you would actually interact?**

A: Yeah, probably, yeah. That sounds really bad! But I guess I don't really...I put the odd thing up now and again, but I don't really use it as much as I used to so I don't really know how to characterise what it means to me.

**So you wouldn't see it as an extension of your personality?**

A: I guess it probably is even though I don't see it that way. But when I think about it, it probably is, because I'm still putting up things I choose to put up, like certain photos and maybe certain statuses; I just don't put up...everything. Just special things, well not special things, occasions, like. Not just photos of anything.

**So is it like an extension of yourself do you think?**

A: I guess it probably is. It's kind of hard when you're thinking about it, yourself. You generally think, 'Oh yeah, it is,' but then you think 'is it really, though?' Probably, I guess, because I suppose I do choose what I put up, putting up what I want people to see, kind of.

**And B, what does Facebook mean to you?**

B: I don't know, it's a big thing for keeping up with people. I'm definitely obsessed with Facebook.

**You're obsessed with Facebook?**

B: Yeah!

**Why?**

B: I just...I have to constantly check it. And you know in class, and I'll be there a half an hour and I have to go on, just to see what's happening on Facebook. Just to see did something happen. Like I might not post anything, but I just want to see what everyone else has posted.

**So then would you see it as an extension of yourself?**

B: [brief pause] Yeah. Definitely so. But, like, it's what you want people to see of you. Like, I don't want every sort of, like a photo of me going up, it's like,

what I want, like. So, you know this review tagging? You know when people tag photos?

**Right, sure.**

B: So I can review it before it goes on my page. So it's definitely what I want people to see, rather than actually me, I guess.

**So would you see your profile as a performance of you?**

B: Yeah.

**Okay. Is it really?**

B: I think parts of it are, but I don't think...

**It's edited?**

B: Yeah. It's the improved me! [laughs].

**The improved you?!**

B: Yeah.

A: You do. It's the same with any kind of, like, photos or whatever that go up. You're kind of, like, I'm not going to tag myself in that photo because I don't look the way I want to look in it. But it is just edited, like. It's obviously not the real you because you look like what you look like in the bad pictures as well as the good pictures, but you don't want that one to go up.

**Okay. So, then, how do you think your life has been impacted by Facebook?**

A: Em, I guess kind of...it's weird. Probably when there's people abroad and you want to keep in contact with them. I don't really use it to keep in contact with people I see all the time. You know when people go to Australia or they're travelling and maybe you're not talking to them all the time, but you're seeing their photos and you're seeing where they are and that's a way of seeing them as still being around.

**So they're still a part of your life even though it's online?**

A: Yeah, pretty much. You can see what they're doing and they can see what you're doing. For big things it's handy. I remember last year, [my boyfriend's] brother was travelling, and we couldn't text him or anything. Wherever he was he didn't have the phone. But his sister in law had twins while he was away, and because of Facebook, he got to know about it and see them, which he wouldn't have otherwise. He'd have had to wait months until he was home. So for things like that I think it's really nice. You can keep in touch and share

things that you wouldn't have been able to. When he was away, Facebook kind of linked him in with what was happening at home.

**And yourself, B, same question.**

B: It definitely has reduced, like, the amount of phone time that I use. I'd say that if my friends are online, it'd be easier to talk to them via Facebook than sending a text or call them. 'Cause now they have the video calls so you can actually see them. And then, it's like a major source for news, and like my parents aren't on Facebook, but say if there was an event or something happening, my mother would be like to me 'did you see any photos on Facebook?' So I can go back to her and say 'Oh, I saw this.' So for me, like, I wouldn't contact home that often. But my sister puts up stuff on Facebook so I get to see what's going on at home. [laughs] Which is probably really bad! I'm like 'Oh yeah, I saw that on Facebook!' But now, if you're talking to friends from home, they're like, 'oh yeah, I saw it on Facebook!' Everyone seems to always be Facebooking!

**So would you say it's a big part of your life?**

B: Yeah, I'd say it's huge.

**Huge?**

B: Yeah. I would, anyway.

A: I'd say it is, I guess I don't like to think that it is a big a part as it is.

**Okay. So would you say that you [A] think about Facebook's impact on your life more than you would [B]?**

A: Yeah. It's not like I'm trying to be above it, I just don't want to be one of those people who constantly post. Yet I probably am, yet I think that I'm not. I still check it...however many times a day.

**But you [B] are more than happy to immerse yourself in it?**

B: Yeah. I wouldn't be posting constantly, I'm just looking.

**Lurking?**

B: Yeah.

**Okay. Are there any personal risks that you think come with having a Facebook presence?**

A: Definitely. Well it depends on the type of person you are and how you use Facebook. People definitely don't think of the implications of having a Facebook account. Say for the likes of going for a job, anybody's going to be looking at your Facebook because that's what they can do. For the most part

it's readily available and it's a way of getting more information on a person, and I don't think people think about this. In that way, there's definitely a big risk. Risks other than that...I don't really know. I mean for me, I see it because I'm aware of myself, but for younger people there's definitely risks involved with going online and not knowing who people are and maybe...the whole thing, which I've never done, of just adding people until you have like a thousand friends. Obviously you don't have a thousand friends, you don't know who all these people are. Some may have ulterior motives. But you just don't know. But for me, I don't think that's much of an issue. I don't add people unless I know them pretty well.

**Okay. And yourself, B?**

B: Yeah, I would say that the risks of the jobs thing. People can just, like, there are so many safety things. Even if someone knew your first name they could easily find out where you live. And like the check in thing. People know where you are.

A: That's a disaster!

B: Yeah, people check themselves in all the time, like when they're at home. And they could be home alone.

**SO they're broadcasting their actual location?**

A: Yeah all the time.

B: That's seriously dangerous.

A: I never use that.

**Would that be your least favourite Facebook feature, then?**

B: Yeah.

A: Definitely. You don't have to use it, obviously. But it's so easy to use it by accident, especially if you're using it on your phone. The amount of things you can do on your phone. On your computer you can see but on your phone you can hit things accidentally. You can like something that you don't mean to like, and you're like 'For God's sake!' That wouldn't happen so much on a computer.

**Okay. What about addiction to Facebook? Is that a big problem, do you think?**

A: I'd say it's pretty big alright! Yeah, I don't spend that long on it but I'd check it ten, twenty times a day. On the phone and you just check Facebook or Twitter or whatever. I'd only spend maybe up to five minutes maximum doing it. Like when I go on it I'd go to the feed and stuff. I'd maybe click into an album if it's an event I'd been to or the family have put up photos, I'll click into

it. I used to look through all the photos but I don't anymore. It is still an addiction to some degree, but I think it's because it's so accessible. Whereas if I was sitting at home on the computer, it'd be very unlikely that I'd look up Facebook on the computer because there's other things I'd be doing.

**Okay. And you think you're addicted, B?**

B: Definitely [laughs].

**Okay!**

B: Definitely, like, in college because it's on my iPod I'll just scroll through it, like. But in the evening time it's open.

**It's always there?**

B: It's constantly open. So, yeah, definitely addicted to it. But, I wouldn't be interested in the games part of it. Like it's a big thing, we don't even have a TV in our house [on campus], but Facebook is on constantly.

**Really?**

B: Yeah.

A: I guess that's not really an issue for me. It's not that a lot of my friends are not on facebook; they're on but they just don't use it. I'd never use it to chat to my friends and I'd never have the chat thing [instant chat] on, I always have it switched off. It would drive me mad if I was just sitting there and it kept popping up!

**So would you say that you [A] are more regimented about your use, whereas you [B] are immersed in it all the time?**

Both: Yeah.

**So would you say that the amount of time you spend on Facebook depends on the number of friends you have?**

A: It probably depends on the group of friends you have rather than the amount of friends you have. Whereas I'd say the most of mine are older, they don't really go out, they don't really do they things I like to do [laughs]. Like the only thing they'd really use Facebook for is the football group that they're on. Or if there is a party, there will be a thing on Facebook. But other than that, I'd only really hear from maybe four or five of them on Facebook. Then there are a few that do use it, but would never chat on it.

**So you [A] prefer face-to-face communication?**

A: Definitely, yeah.

**And you, B?**

B: Em, I don't know if it's that I prefer face-to-face. It's, you know, Facebook is just easier, it's quicker, do you know what I mean? In two sentences you have what you want to say, and it's done. And my friends are big Facebook people. I think that's a big part of why I'm constantly on it.

A: I think a main reason for why I'm not on it that much anymore is that I'm friends with my boyfriend's family, with his mam and dad and his sisters in law. And when you're putting stuff on Facebook you're like 'maybe I don't want his mam to see that, you know?' [laughs].

**Right.**

A: Not that I'd be putting anything incriminating up! [laughs].

**So, are you aware of yourself when you're on Facebook?**

A: Yeah, definitely.

**How about you, B?**

B: I'd say partly, but not fully. Like, I would have uncles on it and I know that they would report back what they see. So you know about, like, reviewing photos and stuff? If there was a wild photo of me, it's not going on my page! But other than that, I'd probably put up, like, whatever.

**Okay. So, what would make you unfriend someone?**

A: Em, specifically, if someone did something that was like, or was just posting inappropriate stuff, I'd unfollow that person. And about a year ago, I went through my friends, and was like, 'This is ridiculous, I'm getting rid of all these people.' A lot of them are from school and stuff so what's the point, like? But there's some of them and I'm like 'I don't care what you do, but you put up hilarious photos!' So, I'm like, there's one person who I was like, 'Okay, you can be my friend again just because your life is too funny!' [laughs]. Sometimes you don't realise people from here, there, and everywhere add you and you're like, 'Okay, I'll look at your things.' But you just weed through them and keep the people you do know.

**Right.**

A: But I don't think there's anything, or I've ever just been like 'Oh, well, I'll unfriend you!' Unless there's somebody that puts something really horrible up, but I wouldn't be friends with somebody that puts something really horrible up in the first place.

**Ok. And B?**

B: Yeah, it's just if the stuff they put up is, like, annoying, like constantly annoying. It's like, 'right, you're gone!' Or say last week I went to a party, met loads of people. The next day I had maybe five or six friend requests. Don't remember the conversations, but like still accepted them. But once they finish here [college], it'll be like 'unfriended!' I don't know them. They're nothing to do with me because I don't remember the conversation with them. So how could they be my friend, you know?

**Sure. Do you ever wish you could edit your friends in the offline world in the same way you can edit them on Facebook?**

A: Em...[laughs]. Not really!

B: [laughs].

A: I guess I kind of have done that in a way. Ever since I left [secondary] school I've done that. Not that I was trying to get away from people, but I didn't want to go in a group to college because I thought that it would take away from the experience. I've got my group of friends and there's not that many there that I feel the need to get rid of.

**Okay. And B?**

B: No, I wouldn't. I'd like maybe to become better friends with some of the people that I'm friends with on Facebook. But I wouldn't like to change who my friends are.

**Okay. Well, I have two statements that I put up on my survey and almost the same amount of people agreed with them as disagreed. I was wondering if I could get your thoughts on them? The first one is: "I would have to know someone very well before I became friends with them on Facebook." That one was almost deadlocked.**

A: Really? That's surprising!

**So, what do you make of that?**

A: Well, there's a lot of people that I'm friends with on Facebook that I wouldn't say I know very well. I've met them a few times and I know that they're nice people, so I don't mind being friends with them on Facebook. There's probably the same amount of people on Facebook that I would say I know very well than there is in real life. I don't know how many friends I have, it's between one and two hundred. It's not hugely excessive, but obviously I don't know those people very well. And even, like, family, you know, there's cousins that I'm friends with and I still wouldn't consider myself to know very well. You're going to add them as friends because you're related to them. And you do know them but, they don't know what I do and I don't know what they do. I don't really know them that well.

**So it's a weak connection you have with them, then?**

A: They are weak connections, but yet I know who they are and I trust them seeing whatever I post, or whatever.

**Okay. And B?**

B: Yeah, well I think it's what I said earlier about accepting people that I've only met once. But then, probably later on, I'll unfriend them. Yeah, I wouldn't have to know people that well, at all.

**Do you think people in general feel compelled to accept friend requests on Facebook?**

A: To some degree, they do. Because, say for a few of my college assignments, we set up groups on Facebook because it's easier to keep in contact with people rather than e-mail and stuff. It's quite handy. But then you set the group and people add you as friends and you can't really say no because we're in a group and they're going to see because we're in a group that we're not friends with each other.

**So they're crossing that boundary between private and professional or academic?**

A: Kind of. I guess they do it because maybe they think that it's the normal thing to do. But for the most part, after the group we're not going to see each other. One or two you might, you're friends with already and that's fine. But even now I'm looking at them and asking 'who's that?' You don't know who they are, yet you do feel compelled to accept them because [laughs] they're going to know if I don't, and it's quite rude! But one we finish here, they'll be gone.

**Okay, right.**

A: It sounds really mean saying that they'll be gone, like you're getting rid of them!

B: You won't see them again.

A: Yeah! Pretty much. Like, if somebody that I didn't know added me, obviously, it's like 'no!' And other people, it's like, 'I know who you are because you're from where I live, but you're five years younger than me or five years older than me.' You just think 'do you know me? No! So, I'm not going to say yes to you.' I guess maybe it's the same thing if you met somebody out the night before and you're chatting and they add you on Facebook and you're kind of compelled.

**And B, you?**

B: Yeah, it's just at the risk of bumping into them after and maybe you didn't add them and it's 'Oh well, you didn't add me on Facebook!'

A: [laughs] How could you!

B: Yeah, 'cause you kind of always think that, maybe if I added somebody and they didn't, how would that make you feel? So you kind of have to do it, just so that...you know, it's just really awkward. It just creates this unnecessary awkwardness.

A: Pretty much, but I'd never, like, if I was after being out for a night and met a few people and was chatting them, I know I wouldn't go and look them up on Facebook and add them as friends.

**Okay, so would that be a downside you would see of using Facebook, that kind of permanence, when it's up on Facebook it's there, there's a physical record of it. Whereas if you meet somebody face-to-face, it's temporary.**

A: Yeah, that's actually, that's quite a good point. Like, it is kind of like that. If I go out, you'd meet somebody and you're having a drink, or a friend of a friend, or something, but I wouldn't go looking for them on Facebook. So I don't think, I don't think everybody does that, but if you're on the receiving end of it, a friend of a friend who added you the next day, you're kind of, more likely to accept.

**Okay. Now we're almost at the end. The other statement from my survey that I wanted to get your opinion on was "In my experience, people behave on Facebook in the same way as they would in the offline world." Again, this was deadlocked. So what do you think of that?**

A: I mean [pause] a lot of people I guess. I guess some people do, but some people I think use it as a way of saying how deadly their life is and they show everything.

**So, bragging?**

A: Pretty much. I mean, there's a serious element of bragging on it. Like, I think it's different for people online, they say things. You know, you wouldn't necessarily be telling people that you met once or twice, 'Oh, I'm going here at the weekend, or I'm going there, and here's some pictures! These deadly pictures from where I've been!' And put it on Facebook to show off to everybody.

**So would you say that Facebook gives people the ability to behave differently?**

A: Oh, yeah.

**Because they can do that online?**

Both: Yeah.

**And they wouldn't do it in real life?**

A: Definitely.

**And B, what do you think about that statement about Facebook behaviour?**

B: Yeah, like, it's really hard to explain. Like, you put stuff on that you want people to see. But then, there is stuff on it that you don't want people to see as well.

**Okay. So can I ask, why would you post something that you wouldn't want people to see?**

B: I don't know, like, maybe somebody else would do it on your behalf. Do you know what I mean? If something like that comes up, it's not really, well I suppose you have no control over it. People are able to see that. I don't know, though, if people behave differently than what they are, on Facebook. Like, my status and stuff, like, the way I speak on that would be the same as I normally would if I was talking to someone. Or if I was commenting on stuff, I wouldn't be putting up a front.

**Okay, right. So you're being honest, do you think, when you're using Facebook?**

B: Yeah.

**So do you think other people are being honest when they're using Facebook? Do you get that impression when you interact with them?**

B: I don't know. Like, sometimes, you know when you put up a photo and one of your friends comments on it, and they're on your friends list, but you might not necessarily be very good friends with them, and they comment, you know 'Oh, you look beautiful!' All this sort of stuff. And, you're like, 'I would never have this conversation with you outside of Facebook!' Do you know what I mean?

A: And then there's other people that you know from seeing them around or whatever, and then you see them on Facebook and you think 'That is like a different person on their Facebook page!' That's an extreme version, I guess.

**So Facebook makes it easier for these extremes to happen, do you think?**

A: I think so, yeah. Like, it is kind of a platform where you can put yourself, can put out everything about you, which I guess maybe is good for some people that maybe wouldn't be able to do it face-to-face. Maybe it's a way of communicating that is easier. You're behind the screen, you're not really putting yourself out there talking to people. Like, it's harder obviously to go up and just start a conversation than maybe it is to comment on a status or like a status or something.

**So you'd say Facebook is a good tool for shy people?**

A: Yeah.

B: Yeah, like it definitely gives people the opportunity to behave differently. But, I think for some people, they're the exact same as what they are in real life. But it definitely does give people the opportunity to behave differently. To make their lives more exciting!

**To make their lives more exciting?**

A: Yeah, well it probably does. Even, like, I'm sure it gives people that are shy or whatever...if on Facebook they're able to like and talk to somebody, if they do strike up a conversation, then maybe the next time they actually see them they might be more likely to actually talk to them.

**Okay, so then it's a way of maybe subtly manipulating people, then?**

A: I think it is for some people.

**Okay, well that's it! Thanks a million for taking part at such short notice!**

B: No problem.

A: That's grand.

***Total interview time: 38 mins, 40 secs.***