Young People, Critical Engagement and Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the way six young people critically engage with social networking sites and the factors that influence their engagement. It used interviews, observations of online behaviour and group discussion to develop a detailed 'picture' of their use of the social networking site Facebook. Using Bourdieu’s habitus and Foucault’s discursive formation as theoretical tools three factors were identified that restrict the participants’ ability to critically engage with the medium: their age (13-14 years); the lack of space and time for critical reflection given the need to be highly reflexive in the presentation of self; and that as a discursive formation it leads the participants to particular discursive practices.
Declaration

This is to certify that:
(i) the thesis comprises only my original work,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is 23900 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices as approved by the Graduate School of Education.

Signed: ____________________________
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Introduction

This research is located where the internet and human identity meet; an intersection that is relatively new and where the grounds are continually shifting. Such an intersection has been brought about by society’s increasing reliance not only to communicate through technology, but also to develop and project an identity. For young people today social networking sites are a key vehicle driving identity representation and formation. Despite this, few questions have been asked about the effect of such a potent combination. How does the person we are online - the behaviours that we engage in and the friends we make - contribute to our sense of identity and agency? It is critical that these questions are addressed if we consider that young people today were born into the digital age, never knowing a life before the internet. Reconciling the various ‘selves’ – the online self and the offline self - is something society asks young people to do without considering how effectively they are able to do it.

Young people are at the intersection of technology and human identity. Society is often forgetful of the fact that it has located young people in the ‘digital’. Instead, phrases like the ‘net generation’ and the ‘digital native’ are tossed around as if the relationship between young people and technology were a natural occurrence. It is important to remember that the social, political and technological trajectories of our middle-class society have designated young people as the front runners or the ‘guinea pigs’ in our relationship with digital technology. Given that we are not yet fully immersed in the digital it is an opportune time to assess critically our assumptions about young people; their use of technology and its effect on identity. This study attempts to understand, rather than assume, things about such a new and important relationship. It asks questions that could be asked of all or any young people, but investigates the practices and actions of a very small group of them. Mindful of this limitation it asks the following question:

In what ways do young people critically engage with social networking sites and what are the factors that influence their engagement?
The concept of critical engagement is important in the context of young people and social networking sites. It not only correlates with a deeper and more meaningful use of such a medium, but it also encourages young people to question how it might be shaping their perception of themselves and the world. Having never known a time before the internet would make this a difficult and unfamiliar process. Not only do social networking sites ask young people to present an identity to the world (when it is quite possible they have not had a chance to work out who they are or who they want to be), but society gives them few opportunities to voice their concerns or questions. If young people are to develop a unique and well-considered identity it is important that they are able to critique the discourses of teenage identity that are promoted and encouraged by social networking sites like Facebook.

It is important to acknowledge the postmodern context within which the current study takes place. Central to this context is of course digital technology, which has caused us to reconsider our identity and place in a ‘global’ world. I use Elliot’s (2001) definition of a postmodern identity and Giddens’ (1991) concept of the reflexive self to understand how social networking sites might help construct and frame a young person’s view of self in the contemporary era. It is also important to understand how young people and their relationship with technology is viewed by the wider population, as this not only influences their concept of identity, but also the way young people have been studied and positioned by the literature. I describe young people as ‘triangulated’ between the real and the virtual; they become a type of threshold figure that constructs and represents their identity across online and offline worlds. How this triangulation is experienced and perceived by young people is influenced by their ability to critically engage with social networking sites and is therefore integral to this research.

This research examines the way social networking sites structure information as this underpins popular patterns of use and could affect identity formation and representation. This may help understand participant responses in the current study. It also makes use of some theoretical ‘tools’ that help understand a young person’s interaction with social networking sites; namely Bourdieu’s habitus and Foucault’s discursive formation. Before continuing it is important to explain the use of the first
person throughout this thesis. I aim to be self-reflexive in my approach to this study; therefore use of first person is essential.

The current chapter locates the research, outlines the following chapters of the thesis and identifies the limitations of a small scale, qualitative study of this kind. In Chapter 2, the relevant literature is reviewed. There are several areas to investigate, bringing together literature on quite disparate subject areas such as young people and the process of identity formation, the structure of social networking sites and studies on critical engagement in online games and websites. Chapter 3 is dedicated to research design and summarises the methodological approach of the study, outlining the reasons for a postmodern perspective on the research and the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. In Chapter 4 the results of the study are presented as individual profiles or ‘pictures’ of the participants use of social networking sites. Chapter 5 discusses the participants’ responses in light of relevant theory and literature to establish the ways the participants critically engage with social networking sites and the factors that influence their engagement. Chapter 6 concludes the study and links the findings of the research to young people and their experience of life and education.

Being small in scale there are limitations to this study. It was limited to six participants and two interviews and took place in one school term (10 weeks). Given the length of the dissertation (24,000 words) the study was focused specifically on critical engagement with social networking sites, despite the fact that other avenues of investigation opened up as the study progressed. Furthermore, the interpretive nature of qualitative research makes it difficult to extrapolate any hard and fast facts from the data. What can be achieved, however, is a snapshot of how social networking sites are being used by these participants, and this, I believe, can have resonance beyond the six participants studied.

The participants in this study come from a Government school for girls in Melbourne’s inner east. They range from 13-14 years old. Given the fact that this Government school has one of the highest numbers of parents/guardians educated to a tertiary level, and that it is located in an affluent suburb, these girls reflect a particular demographic. They have ready access to technology and, we could presume, parents
who have expectations about their education that may well extend to a critical engagement with social networking sites. In this way, examining the way these students engage with social networking sites might enable inferences to be made about other young people’s practises.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to establish a theoretical window through which to view the research. This is important, not only in the context of this thesis. The social and ethical issues that arise from the digital world are often overlooked as a deterministic approach has tended to polarise both academic and popular discussion of technology use. This literature review aims to open up a middle ground for reflection on technology use and capture the complexity of social networking practices, without using labels like ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Indeed, because of such deterministic characterisations social networking sites and technology are often topics for news and current affairs. For this reason, I draw upon popular media as well as academic literature to ensure a rich and instructive review of young people and their use of social networking websites.

The Postmodern Context

If the postmodern era can be defined as ‘the analysis of disintegrating modernist social orders and representations’ (Elliot, 2010, p. 290) then our technological world certainly fits into this epoch. The very structure of computer technology, and more specifically the online community, is ‘rhizomatic’ (Deleuze in Schroeder, 2005, p. 287): horizontal rather than vertical; decentred rather than centred; unstructured rather than structured, with many points, intersections and overlappings. This is the environment in which the middle class youth of today, the so called ‘digital natives’, inhabit. Armed with mobile technology and immersed in a world of ‘chat’ they are always ‘connected’.

The implications of this environment on identity are numerous. It seems identity is no longer formed through vertical structures and institutions (Urry, 2000). Place of birth, residence or work no longer have the same identifying effect on an individual, as we become ‘global citizens’ who, through mobile technology, can be in many places at once. Turkle (2006) calls this the ‘habit of co-presence’(p. 124). She writes that ‘being “elsewhere” than where you might be has become something of a marker of your own self-importance’(p. 124). ‘Co-presence’, therefore, has become an essential
part of being a young person today. Not only is individual identity composed in new ways, but our emergence in the virtual questions what it means to be human. As Hardt and Negri (2002) explain ‘interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds’ so that the ‘anthropology of cyberspace is really a recognition of the new human condition’ (p. 291).

In his book ‘Natural Born Cyborgs’, Andy Clark (2003) puts forward the argument that human beings have always been ‘cyborgs’, seamlessly incorporating technology into our lives on a cognitive level through what he describes as a ‘sociotechnological matrix’ (p. 33) or a ‘human-machine integration’ (p. 24). He believes that early technologies like the pen achieve ‘parity’ with the hand and it is ‘this parity that ultimately blurs the line between the intelligent system and its best tools for thought and action’ (pp. 28-29). In his view, the ‘fluidity’ of the human machine integration and its ability to ‘transform’ our capacities and lifestyles will determine how influential the technology may be.

Clark’s theory is instructive when considering social networking websites. Social networking sites like Facebook have been streamlined to suit everyday use and are automatically installed on just about every mobile phone on sale today. Clearly such social networks have transformed the way we communicate and socialise. In this way social networking sites are reaching ‘parity’ with our ‘real life’ social interactions by becoming indispensable to many young people today. For example, boyd (2008) reports one young MySpace user as saying, ‘If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist’ (p. 119). Clark sees new technology as a ‘tool’ that we choose to use in an objective way. However, not everyone agrees with this view of technology. Writing from an ethical stance Lucas Introna (2006) argues that we need to reverse this objective ‘tool’ view of technology and instead see it as capable of political power. In this way technology is ‘socially shaped and socially shaping’ (Buckingham, 2008, p. 12, citing Williams 1974).

**Identity Formation and Young People**

Given that adolescence is a critical period of identity formation, how do today’s teenagers assemble a concept of themselves? According to Erikson one aspect of
identity formation involves overcoming uncertainty to become more aware of personal strengths and weaknesses and this largely takes place during adolescence. Through this process an individual will begin to feel confident in their own unique qualities. He sees adolescence as a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ (Erikson, 1971, p. 156), a period or a ‘space’ in which young people can experiment with identity and engage in risks of various kinds with fewer consequences. It is in this way they are able to find the ‘niche’ in which they belong. The digital world can play an important role in this process. Experimenting with who you are and what you believe in is easier with a virtual identity constructed through social networking websites. In her book ‘Alone Together: The Tethered Self’, Sherry Turkle (2011) writes about the personal profile constructed by users on a social networking site ‘as an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are, but also who you want to be’ (p. 180). In her view it’s not just presentation, but aspiration. Further to this she argues that the demands of modern life – school, university, employment and friendship pressures - has meant that ‘the years of identity construction are recast in terms of profile production’ (p. 182). So, while social networking sites afford young people the opportunity to explore and experiment, it is still a highly regulated environment that insists identity be presented in a particular way.

According to Elliot (2001) ‘fragmentation of the self’ is one of three core aspects of a postmodern theory of identity. The second is ‘a narcissistic preoccupation with appearance, image and style’ (Elliot, 2001, p. 145). To a large extent this preoccupation is encouraged by social networking sites like Facebook, because a personality that is social, confident and extroverted is encouraged by the structure of the site, as it is based around external markers of identity, like photos and status updates. To take it a step further, social networking sites become an integral tool in Giddens’ (1991) conception of the self as a ‘reflexive project’ (p. 32). He believes that the contemporary era requires the individual to be constantly revising and refashioning in response to new lifestyle choices in what can be thought of as a ‘self defining’ process. As Giddens writes, ‘we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’ (p. 75). In some respects this is empowering for the individual – they are in control of their own destiny. However, others have argued that the reflexive project leads to high anxiety and insecurity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), as people look for ‘guidance and validation’ (Branaman, 2010, p. 140) in the lives they lead. Social
networking sites have become an important tool in the representation and actualisation of the individual in the postmodern era.

An article featured in *The Age* newspaper, Melbourne (Edwards, 2010), reported on three ‘digital natives’ who went ‘cold turkey’ or without any hand-held devices for one week. The results and observations of the three participants were interesting. None of them lasted the week without their hand-held gadgets. Some inconvenience was noted in completing ‘chores’ such as reading maps and banking, but of more interest was the impact that this ‘disconnection’ had on their social lives. One participant acknowledges how cut off he was without access to Facebook: ‘I have just returned from a group meeting and realised that I am quite behind as I have been out of contact with the group. We had a thread on Facebook and they have kept on communicating. Now I have to work into the night to catch up. Arrrgh’ (p. 9). Without access to new media participation becomes difficult. Castells argues that while new media has had a profound impact on our everyday lives it still ‘reinforces existing social patterns’, meaning that certain sections of the population will remain excluded with ‘local’ rather than ‘global’ identities (Castells in Elliot, 2010, p. 157). For the participant quoted this seems to be the case. Without access to Facebook he was no longer part of the group and excluded from the thread, requiring him to complete ‘traditional’ study that could potentially jeopardise his social and academic standing.

The article also highlights the reality of the reflexive project via new media and social networks. Hand-held gadgets, now key tools in social networking, give users the opportunity to enter the digital world at any time. One participant bemoans not being able to share his thoughts at every possible opportunity: ‘I really missed my chance to show and tell,’ he said. While another laments, ‘I have a witty thought in my head but nowhere to broadcast it :’ (Edwards, 2010, p. 9). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe the identities constructed through the ‘reflexive’ or ‘do-it-yourself’ biography as ‘precarious’ (p. 3). They argue that such biographies encourage a state of ‘permanent endangerment’ because the ‘façade of prosperity, consumption and glitter can often mask the nearby precipice’ (p. 3). In the reflexive project of the self, wrong choices or decisions take on more significance in the pursuit for continual self-
improvement. However, for young people making such mistakes should be viewed as a learning process; it is a part of growing up.

The ubiquity of social networking sites means that thoughts and ideas can be shared at all times with the click of a few buttons. As Turkle (2011) writes social networking sites and mobile technology ‘support an emotional style in which feelings are not fully experienced until they are communicated’ (p. 175). The individual becomes a kind of threshold figure, standing between worlds, the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’; they are a triangulated subject in a world that is, in part, their own creation (Pangrazio, 2011). Rather than being online or offline; real or virtual, the position of their identity is almost a ‘nodal’ point between these worlds. Occupying this threshold position is precarious. It requires the individual to be many things at once; to mediate and perpetuate their identity for the variety of audiences and discourses they experience.

**Who are the ‘digital natives’?**

Despite the speed at which new technology has been created certain terms and phrases to describe the phenomena have stuck. One of these is ‘digital native’, a term coined by Marc Prensky (2001, p. 2), to refer to those born in the digital age. The binary opposite is ‘digital immigrant’, denoting those born in a pre-digital age. Prensky’s main claim is that there is an identifiable generational break that characterises technology use across generations. The natives are highly skilled users of technology, while their immigrant instructors ‘speak an outdated language [and are] struggling to teach a population that speak an entirely new language’ (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). Despite the lack of evidence and clarity in the use of these terms, Jones and Czerniewicz (2010) acknowledge that they ‘continue to have an influence on policy and practice in education’ (p. 318). Further to this, Susan Herring (2008) writes much of the research and writing about young people and technology tends to ‘exoticise’ their experience terming it as novel, transformative and radically different from any generation before.

Prensky’s binary language is quite emblematic, not only of how the debate regarding digital technology has progressed, but of the way research has been conducted. Rooted in the colonial experience, the term ‘native’ pre-empts how researchers, parents and educators approach their interaction with young people. They are framed
as ‘other’ and knowledge about their experience is typically gathered in the anthropological tradition of uncovering what they are ‘hiding’. In reality, the situation is more complex. Building on the work of Perry Barlow, Lankshear and Bigum (1999), prefer the terms ‘insiders’ and ‘newcomers’ to ‘native’ and ‘immigrant’ and in this way are able to develop a more nuanced picture of technology use across the generations. Rather than focusing on the difference of skill levels between generations like Prensky, they identify two mindsets; one which ‘affirms the world as the same as before, only more technologised; the other affirms the world as radically different, precisely because of the operation of new technologies’ (Lankshear & Bigum, 1999, p. 458).

In fact, a number of studies debunk Prensky’s view, suggesting that many young people are not as skilled with technology as what is commonly thought. Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarnot et al’s (2010) large scale study of Australian university students’ use of technology found that 45% of participants were ‘Basic Users’ of technology and could be characterised by ‘infrequent use of new and emerging technologies and less than weekly or monthly use of standard Web technologies’ (p. 337). Only 15% of participants were described as ‘Power Users’ who ‘appropriate a wide range of technologies and use them significantly’ (p. 337). Other studies show that apart from social networking, most young people are not engaged in activities associated with Web 2.0 technology, like blogs and wikis (Salaway & Caruso, 2007). While there might be a small group of highly skilled users of technology – the real Digital Natives, the ‘Power Users’ so to speak – the majority of young people are not as proficient as we might like to think. Some studies have found that even basic skills are lacking. Livingstone (2008) noted that a ‘fair proportion’ of the participants in her study were unsure or showed hesitancy when asked how to change the privacy settings on their social networking site (p. 406). In the context of the current study these findings are important. Social networking websites are commonly used, almost indispensable to some, but many young people are struggling to master Web 2.0 technologies, let alone critically examine them.
The benefits of social networking sites have been widely discussed. A brief look at the literature will show that Facebook alone has been found to enhance self-esteem (Gonzales, 2011), help teaching and learning and organising of relationships between staff and students (Shiu, Fong, & Lam, 2010), create community awareness and support for environmental issues (Greenhow, 2009) and is a popular tool for raising awareness and fundraising (Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin, & Jaddad, 2011). As these studies show there are many positives to social networking sites; often so many that the ethical considerations are overshadowed. Knowledge of the way social networking sites structure information and experience is useful in the current study, because it will help to understand the way it shapes communication, relationships and perceptions. In this section, I draw upon Poster’s idea of the database to examine the structure of social networking use.

The internet - and the social networking sites situated within it - is predicated on speed and efficiency. Information is retrieved with lightning speed as we enter our library barcode into the system or type in our credit card details for the various ‘chores’ we complete over the net. But such efficiency can only occur because each individual has been simplified to a static portrayal of themself as consumer, student or group member; as fields in a database. In order to understand the impact of such simplicity I use Poster (1995) and his discussion of databases. He claims that databases are unlike ‘…narratives, which are complex and flexible, they are severely restricted forms of discourse’ (p. 66). Most programs only allow certain marks to be made in certain ‘fields’, so the information is stored in a way the program can ‘handle’ and retrieve easily. While Poster is referring to databases a comparison can be drawn with social networking sites: both structure and organise large amounts of information so they can be used quickly and efficiently. A personal profile on a social networking site represents an individual identity by marks in a pre-determined field; what was once complex, nuanced and highly individualised, becomes simplified and categorised.

Poster (1995) explains ‘…databases configure reality, make composites of individual experience, that could be characterised as caricature’ (p. 66). Identity, communication
and social reality are constructed and streamlined through the social networking site and this produces a particular version of the multifaceted experience that is being human. Due to the structure of the internet information must be simplified - identity can become a more static portrayal of an individual and communication is mediated through certain ‘fields’.

*Theoretical Lenses: Bourdieu’s habitus and Foucault’s discursive formation*

What follows is the introduction of the two major theoretical tools used in the study, as well as a discussion of the theoretical tensions between them. Bourdieu and Foucault have been employed here to account for the two different levels of focus and analysis required to examine critical engagement with social networking sites. Bourdieu’s habitus provides a lens through which individual behaviour on social networking sites can be examined. According to Bourdieu’s theory, individuals construct themselves through social situations. Habitus helps understand how ‘the social is inscribed in the body of the biological individual’ (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 113). It is a multi-layered concept which is useful when examining both individual and collective behaviour. While habitus is not ‘uniformly imposed’ (Mc Leod & Yates, 2006, p. 90) and allows for individual improvisation, it can also be thought of as ‘a generative set of principles common to a class’ (Lechte, 1994, p. 47); hence its application in understanding the social practices of the individual participant and the group of participants collectively.

While Bourdieu helps understand individual practice, Foucault’s theory of discursive formation makes sense of how social networking sites and the discursive practices they give rise to can be interpreted at a structural or system level. This provides a broader picture of critical engagement with social networking sites, but is developed through close analysis of individual responses to the structure of such a networked system. I do not wish to simplify the distinction between the two theories as there are points of intersection and overlap; however, in the current study each has been employed with a different purpose in mind.
**Habitus**

Bourdieu sought to create a theory that located both human agency and social structures as guiding practice (Navarro, 2006). Through habitus, Bourdieu describes the ways in which the body is in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body (Bourdieu, 1977). It constitutes a ‘system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). Because no two people share the same history, no two people have the same habitus. Further to this habituses are not inert but ‘permeable and responsive to what is going on around them’ (Reay, 2004, p. 434).

Habitus is formed through interaction with fields, which can be defined as ‘a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities’ (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, pp. 21-22). Social networking sites fit this description of a field and will be thought of as such in the current study. Each field has a relative degree of autonomy from other contexts. Bourdieu notes:

> Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself “as a fish in water”, it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu interviewed by Wacquant 1989 in Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 14).

However, when an individual finds themself in different fields or different parts of a field, a sense of disjuncture is experienced as they develop new facets of self in response. This disjuncture may result in resistance and perhaps a new awareness, which becomes part of the habitus and its formation (Reay, 2004). This has particular resonance for the current study as many of the participants have only been using social networking sites for a short time and are, therefore, experiencing a new social field.
While engagement with the field might be a matter of learning the ‘rules of the game’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), habitus does leave space for ‘new creative responses that are capable of transcending the social conditions in which [they were] produced’ (Reay, 2004, p. 435). Nevertheless, the struggle for status and resources within the field is conceptualised through ‘cultural capital’, which is best explained by ‘what underpins authority, what is valued, what actors gain from their participation’ (Bennett & Maton, 2010, p. 326). Cultural capital can be material and symbolic and, in part, determines the amount of power one has in the field. The duality of habitus means that it can be employed in the current study to understand individual behaviour, as well as how the group, which is made up of individuals of the same class, age and gender, interacts with the medium.

Habitus has particular resonance when considering young people’s use of the internet, which emerges as one of the most influential social fields for this generation. One only need consider the phrases that are used to describe young people – the digital natives or net generation for example – to come to the conclusion that there was some kind of inherent link between this generation and digital technology, and that they are indeed ‘fish in water’. However, it is important to remember that their reliance on technology has been created by the social, political and historical trajectories of our society that located this generation in the digital. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus also helps explain how this generation has positioned themselves in this postmodern context. In part society provided the technological opportunities for the so called ‘digital natives’, but through their own behaviours they have constructed a new set of values – adapted a habitus so to speak - to suit the field. As Robbins (2000) notes, ‘For some groups, their condition may almost coincide with their situation which then appears to be ‘natural’ and legitimately to give rise to universal explanations’ (p. 30). If we take this to be the case with young people today, then universalising their experience could lead to inaccurate assumptions about their use of the internet. As Buckingham writes: ‘The optimistic view of young people as a ‘digital generation’ – as somehow automatically liberated and empowered through their experience of these new technologies - is little more than a form of wishful thinking’ (Buckingham, 2007, p. 75).
Discursive Formation

Given the highly proscriptive nature of online social networks as well as the language, behaviours, concepts and architecture (both digital and social) that result it is possible to conceive of such a medium as a discursive formation. While this might be a somewhat unconventional reading and application of Foucault, given the pre-eminence of social networking sites in our society and how they have shaped our social relationships, ideas and methods of communication, discursive formation provides a framework through which to understand such a pervasive medium.

The concept of discourse was first explored in Foucault’s book *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1966), but was later expanded in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002), where he also introduces the notion of discursive formation and discursive practice. A discursive formation can be approximated to a discipline (like political science, literature or medicine) or ‘divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar’ (p. 24). Using medical science as an example, Foucault explains that from the 19th century practitioners began to ‘presuppose the same way of looking at things’ and that medicine was organised by a ‘certain style’ and ‘series of descriptive statements’ (p. 37). He later concludes:

> Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices one can define a regularity…we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation (p. 41).

O’Farrell (2005) claims discursive formations are ‘a bit like the grammar of a language [and] allow certain statements to be made’ (p. 79). In this way discursive formations provide a ‘space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 36). In medical science, the word, ‘objects’, refers to various illnesses and treatments that entered the lexicon (and essentially came into existence) as a result of the ‘irruption’ of a medical discourse. For instance, before the condition schizophrenia was named, there were symptoms denoting it, but once it emerged in the lexicon of mental health as an object to be examined it grew its own branch and system of research and treatment. Discursive formations create systems of
knowledge and lead to a particular way of engaging with the world, which Foucault terms discursive practice (Foucault, 2002, p. 53).

So how can social networking sites, like Facebook, be seen as a discursive formation leading to particular discursive practices? I will address this question in two parts. First, looking at the site and examining the language used by creators in relation to the site, as well as the architecture and style of the site itself, will show similarities with the structure of a discursive formation. Second, a more in-depth answer will be established upon analysis of the data to reveal whether there is a ‘regularity’ to the types of statements, concepts and behaviours reported by participants. Is there a system or guiding set of rules to social networking sites that asks users to engage with the world in a particular way? Such an exploration will take place in Chapter 5.

Divided by scientific practices, like a medical discourse, today’s society is also divided by demographics identified for marketing purposes. For example, the term ‘teenager’, was brought into use in the 1950s through market research, and today we see newly invented categories such as ‘tweens’, ‘kidults’ and ‘middle youth’ (Buckingham, 2008). After being identified the demographic is made ‘available’ not to scientists, but instead to the capital market. Social networking sites work largely in the same way. A target demographic is identified and then sold the program that will become essential to their social life. Facebook was created by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg with a goal to ‘…help people connect and communicate more efficiently’ (Lacy, 2008) and was geared towards University students. However, Zuckerberg’s vision for Facebook became broader. In a 2006 interview with Zuckerberg, journalist David Kirkpatrick wrote, ‘He is more concerned with a vision of changing the world. And he is deeply immersed in seeing it reified’ (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Zuckerberg acknowledges that ‘…the future of the company won’t really be as a destination Website, but as the Web-wide platform that connects us not just to our friends but also the businesses that we transact with’ (Carlson, 2009). According to some, this Facebook web-wide platform is not too far away, with the big selling point being users will only need to remember one password.
Foucault observes that subjects interpellated\(^1\) by a discursive formation begin to act in accordance with the identity that has been created for them; they use the language, embody the look and carry out particular behaviours typical to their identity. Some theorists term this aspect of Foucault’s work as ‘Self-formation’ (Sercombe, 2010). Facebook has created its own language; young people in my classroom claim to have ‘Facebooked’ a friend, meaning they contacted someone via Facebook. Furthermore, words like ‘status’, ‘upload’, ‘friend’, ‘unfriend’ and ‘like’ have all taken on a new and particular meaning.

Of concern for Foucault, was that discursive formations were largely accepted without question. When social networking sites are subject to a Foucauldian reading and seen as a discursive formation then we can analyse just how behaviour might be affected and understand ‘why one particular statement appeared and not another’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 30), or why we say and do some things rather than others. This might help us reflect upon the impact technology is having on human behaviour. If we are to accept a discursive formation without question, then we are failing to acknowledge a whole series of important questions. Foucault outlines the problem as such:

> What we must do, in fact, is to tear away from their [discursive formations] virtual self-evidence, and to free the problems they pose, to recognise that they are not the tranquil locus on the basis of which other questions may be posed, but that they themselves pose a whole cluster of questions (What are they? How can they be defined or limited? ...What specific phenomena do they reveal in the field of discourse?) (Foucault, 2002, pp. 28-29)

I would argue that as our society moves into the digital age, and our reliance on social networking sites becomes irreversible, it is critical that we ask just how our experience of life is being shaped by such technologies.

\(^1\) In this context interpellate means the process by which an ideology or doctrine addresses the individual, and as a result produces him or her as a ‘subject’.
Critical Engagement

What is being examined in the current study is young people’s critical engagement with social networking sites and the factors that influence their engagement. Critical engagement can be defined as referring to two concepts: ‘the development of an understanding of the rhetorical complexities inherent in the use of digital technologies, and an understanding of how digital technologies can change both the way users approach tasks and the way they see the world’ (DigiRhet.org, 2006, p. 247). Critical engagement is not just mastery of technology, but seeing beyond the digital ‘text’ to understand its presentation and construction, as well as questioning the information that it displays. Jane Tallim of the Media Awareness Network, writes that critical engagement with media is ‘about asking what’s there, and noticing what’s not there...it's the instinct to question what lies behind media productions— the motives, the money, the values and the ownership—and to be aware of how these factors influence content’ (Tallim, 2010).

In this study I draw upon these definitions to explain that critical engagement means an awareness of two things: the structure and conventions of social networking sites; and how they present information and interaction in a particular way. Without such awareness it is difficult for young people to act independently of the discourse encouraged and promoted by social networking sites. Henry Jenkins (2006) terms the inability to analyse and read online sites as ‘texts’ as the ‘transparency problem’, which he defines as ‘the challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that the media shape perceptions of the world’ (p. 3). A more expansive and practical definition of critical engagement is articulated in Chapter 3.

So far few studies have looked specifically at whether young people are critical users of social networking sites. Livingstone (2008) analysed the content that was created on social networking sites. She found that while users of MySpace included music on their profile, when asked about the ‘profile lists’ of blogs, groups or forums that can be found along the top bar, ‘the question was often met with blank looks’ (p. 406). This led her to conclude that ‘The limits of teenager’s supposedly exploratory and
creative approach to social networking are, it seems, easily reached’ (p. 407). She also discovered that the majority of users found it difficult to change their privacy settings.

One answer to the problem uncovered by Livingstone might be found in a two year ethnographic study on Facebook use by Light and McGrath (2010). They showed ‘that Facebook applications began shaping the user experience at the very point of registration,’ (Light & K, 2010, p. 305) and concluded that the applications on the social networking site were so distracting to users that it made it difficult for them to change their privacy settings, even if they wanted to. Most recently Facebook have announced a ‘significant privacy-led revamp of the social networking site’(Moses, 2011, p. 5) that enables users, among other things, to approve photos they are tagged in. Users will now manage all content on their profile by a drop-down menu, however, privacy advocates have concerns that this change will be not be effective. David Vaille from UNSW Cyberspace Law and Policy Centre explains: ‘Adding new controls all over the place superficially offers extra choice and control, but, as before, there is already too much choice and control for most people to understand, and they tend to overload and give up’ (Moses, 2011, p. 5).

In their large scale study of teenagers and the legal risks of social networking sites, de Zwart, Lindsay et al (2011) discovered that ‘19.6% of students seemed ambivalent about risk, essentially reporting that the degree of risk was irrelevant to them as it is “just what everyone does”’ (p. 2). Despite this, 72.4% of students surveyed indicated that they had ‘unwanted or unpleasant contact by strangers via their social networking profile’ (p. 2). boyd and Hargittai (2010) found that while young people are concerned by privacy issues when using social networking sites, their ability to modify their privacy settings was linked to their skill level. Those who were more adept at posting information were better at adjusting who could see their posts. In a sense the more skilled a user the more critical and concerned about these ethical issues they are likely to be. It appears that the picture of social networking use is complex and continually evolving. Both studies indicate, however, that young people’s ability to perceive the problems associated with privacy and social networking, and change settings accordingly, is limited.
Studies of online games give some insight into how young people critically engage with digital technology. While social networking sites and online games are obviously different in nature and structure, the relationship between the user and the interface is the similar, and this is relevant to the current study. In his study on using the game *Civilization III* in a history class, Squires (2004) encouraged the students to ‘lift the hood’ (p. 235) on the game or look beneath the surface to understand how the game structures and represents the ‘reality’ that it creates and to understand the motives behind the game designer. Essentially, what Squires was asking his participants to do was to critically examine this digital text. After considerable encouragement he observes that the participants are not interested in this element of the game or that the rules underlying the simulation were simply ‘too overwhelming’ for them to comprehend – they simply wanted to master the game. The challenge for participants to win the game superseded their desire to critically engage with it.

Schrier (2005) made similar observations in her study on an augmented reality game she created called ‘Reliving the Revolution’. When students found errors in the game they did not consider that it could be the fault of the game designer, but instead considered it an opportunity to question the ‘authority’ of the historical figures in the game itself. Despite knowing that ‘Reliving the Revolution’ was a game, the players acted out the game as if the ‘information was authentic’ (p. 147), believing that the fictional testimonials were in fact speeches made by the characters. Both studies cited here demonstrate that students had great difficulty critically engaging with these particular digital texts, even when prompted to do so. Due to the immersive nature of the medium, rather than question the information the participants believed the truth presented by the text, and in the latter case questioned the authenticity of the fictional characters over the construction of the online game. To explain this observation one suggestion put forward by Schrier is people ‘suspend their disbelief’ (p. 147) when playing games in order to have a more immersive game playing experience. This phenomenon has been noted by Bolter and Grusin. He describes the interface as ‘transparent…one that erases itself so that the user is no longer aware of confronting the medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 24). This is the idea behind many games and websites – to fully immerse oneself in another world. Critiquing a game or website is
contrary to everything that the designers have created and therefore requires a whole new way of thinking about the medium and its contents.

Conclusion

The idea that identity is now triangulated between the real and the virtual presents young people with a new challenge. How do they develop and maintain a strong and consistent version of themselves when they encounter digital discourses that ask them to behave in a particular way? Critical skills would help in this process of negotiation and experimentation. A number of key points emerge from Chapter 2. First, given the ‘rhizomatic’ nature of the postmodern era and, more specifically, the online environment, identity should be seen as ‘fluid’. I want to explore how a young person’s sense of identity and agency might be affected by such an unstable set of circumstances, specifically those encountered in the online environment in order to understand their critical engagement. Second, assumptions have been made about young people and their relationship with technology. While young people are commonly thought of as ‘digital natives’, who use technology in ways that older generations cannot understand, some studies, in fact, reveal that very few young people are as adept as we might like to think. Third, because the internet is predicated on speed and efficiency, personal information must be simplified according to the structure set out by the creators of the social networking site. In this way, social networking sites, like Facebook, can be viewed as a discursive formation that produces particular discursive practices.
Chapter 2: Research Design

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the following research question: in what ways do young people critically engage with social networking sites and what are the factors that influence their engagement?

Methodology

There were several possibilities for the research design: an ethnographic study; a quantitative survey or a qualitative interview. Each would yield quite a different picture of young people and their use of social networking sites. As Eisner (1988) acknowledges: ‘Awareness is always limited by the tools we use’ (p 17). Different research instruments might yield quite different results and therefore must be chosen with great care. It is also important to acknowledge that digital technology is invoking unforeseen online and offline behaviours that may be difficult to capture through traditional research methods (Lankshear & Leander, 2005, p. 332). For this reason the research took place in a somewhat naturalistic setting (a classroom), but used a qualitative peer administered interview. The interviews were complemented by a follow up interview, observations of class discussions and, where possible, observations of social networking practices. These sources of information helped understand and make meaning from what was reported in the peer administered interview. There are several reasons for such a research design.

The interviews took place during a normal English class for these students. Such a familiar setting hoped to create a sense of security and comfort in the participants, making them more inclined to speak truthfully about the social phenomena in question. The participants were also involved in the research process and helped to construct the interview questions and carry out the interviews on each other. There were two reasons for this. First, the aim was to deliver an ‘insider’s perspective’ on
social networking use, not only through the answers to the interview questions, but also through the questions and ideas that the participants added to the set of interview questions. In this way, the research could be likened to social and cultural anthropology which ‘attempts to understand alien belief systems “from inside”, rather than judging them from a Western, scientific point of view’ (Hammersley, 2002, p. 66) While this study does not maintain that the belief systems of young people are ‘alien’, their relationship with technology has been characterised as such by popular media, and in some respects by academics (Herring, 2008).

Second, involving the participants in the research process aims to lessen the power imbalance between researcher/teacher and participant. In this context, such power imbalance may skew results. Rather than participants ‘telling it like it is’, they may feel pressure to respond in a particular way if the researcher is an authority figure, like a teacher, which is the case in the current study. Collaborating with student researchers was one way to breakdown this hierarchy; the ‘subjects’ were positioned as active ‘participants’ working with the researcher toward a common goal (Herring, 2008). The participants in this study were actively involved in designing the interview questions and collecting data.

The current study used a qualitative approach that developed a ‘narrative’ or ‘picture’ of each participant’s use of social networking sites. It is intended that a portrayal of participant’s behaviours will assist in understanding the nature of their critical engagement. Such a characterisation was developed through the peer administered interviews, and complemented by the follow up interview, observations of class discussions and online behaviour. Zeller (1995) describes this approach as ‘characterisation through dialogue’ (p. 80) and cites Brooks and Warren (1970) in outlining its benefits: ‘to understand an action we must understand the people involved, their natures, their motives, their responses, and to present an action so that it is satisfying we must present the people’ (p. 609). According to Zeller, the researcher needs to provide an impression of real life and attempt to produce a report that ‘achieve[s] a sense of reality by rendering character chiefly through full recording of dialogue’(p. 80). Such an approach is interpretive in nature, but was closely based on the recordings and transcripts of the participant interviews. In addition, the follow up interview, as well as observations of class discussion and social networking
practices, helped to further understand and contextualise the information reported in the initial interview.

As a researcher I aimed for reflexivity in the current study, meaning I examined my own position in the research process. Given the interpretive nature of the data collection, it was important that I was aware of my own perspective and biases and how they may affect results and discussion. Royce Sadler (2002) terms this type of bias a ‘value inertia’ (p. 125) and ‘can be traced to a particular evaluator’s background, knowledge, prior experience, emotional make up, or world view’ (p. 125). This has the potential to affect how the data was collected and interpreted. To a large extent, value inertia is unavoidable because it is ‘simply the natural characteristics of a person as a person’ (p. 125). Scriven (1967) argues that this is a natural element of evaluation and does not call for any apology. However, simply being aware of value inertia through a process of reflection is important. In their qualitative research with young people, McLeod and Yates (2006), set up opportunities ‘to think self-critically about the attributions’ they are ‘making about the meaning of texts in relation to the larger education issues’ (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 17). The current study aimed to achieve a similar reflexivity, by interrogating the way I, as a researcher, made meaning of participant’s statements given the digital milieu that is the backdrop to our lives.

Participants

The participants were drawn from a class of 25 Year 8 students, ranging from 12-14 years old, for which I am the appointed teacher. The study took place in a Government Secondary College for girls and formed part of a unit on digital literacy for a year 8 English class. The school is located in Melbourne’s inner east and has a Student Family Occupation (SFO) density of .21. This figure tells us that a high number of the parents/guardians of the girls at this school are Tertiary educated and working in professional occupations (DEECD, 2011). All students were asked to participate, but only six students who consented to participate (parental and student consent granted) were included in the study.
Critical engagement with social networking sites – a working definition

In order to investigate critical engagement it is important to provide a contextual definition. While not specifically methodological in nature, this definition informs the approaches taken to data collection and analysis.

I considered critical engagement to mean several key things. First, it meant knowledge of the conventions of social networking sites and an awareness of how they structure information and interaction in a particular way. In practical terms this might mean knowing how to adjust privacy settings and limiting the amount of personal or private information that is posted. It might also mean knowing the difference between an online friend and an offline friend, and not becoming friends with strangers or unfamiliar people. Using social networking sites critically might also mean demonstrating behaviour that is appropriate for the medium. No doubt what is deemed appropriate would vary across age and cultural groups, however, certain behaviours would be universally considered inappropriate. For example, engaging in offensive or mean behaviour online would be considered inappropriate by most groups. It might also mean avoiding posting provocative photos or posts and, as a corollary of this, being aware of the digital ‘fingerprint’ that will stay with them into the future.

Critical engagement might also mean resisting the pressure that social networking sites like Facebook place on the user in relation to posting photos, posts and having a lot of friends. Given the pre-eminence of photos on the site young people could become overwhelmed by the pressure that such a visual medium places on them. One aspect of the study investigated whether the site encouraged or directed particular behaviour in users and if they were aware of it. Resisting pressure to behave according to that which is promoted by social networking sites like Facebook is largely dependent on the participants’ sense of self-confidence and agency.

Central to many of the ideas about what critical engagement means is an understanding of the difference between online and offline identity. Livingstone argues against such a simplistic distinction as online and offline, suggesting that ‘while social networking is displacing other forms of online communication to some
degree (email, chatrooms, website creations), it incorporates others (instant messaging, blogging, music downloading) and remediates yet more (most notably face-to-face and telephone communication)’ (Livingstone, 2008, p. 395). Bolter’s concept of remediation - a process in which ‘new media refashion prior media forms’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 232) - may indeed complicate such a clear-cut distinction. However, this more simplistic language was used with participants, as it was easier for them to comprehend and respond to. In fact, whether they were aware of the nuances and the finer distinctions between their online and offline identity is instructive in itself.

Data Collection

At the first stage the main aims of the study were outlined and discussed with the class of student researchers. They were handed an A5 sheet of paper that had some of the keywords of the study written on it to prompt an initial discussion. These words and phrases were chosen for a number of reasons. First, they are the names of commonly used social networking sites and the features, tags or actions associated with them (Facebook, Twitter, Status, Photo, Friend). Second, they describe some key words of the study and the social phenomena associated with social networking sites (Peer Pressure, Presentation of Identity, Online Identity, Offline Identity, Social Networking). The main purpose was to instigate discussion around the topic of digital literacy and for the students to report and reflect on their current behaviours. This whole class discussion lasted approximately half an hour. Notes were taken during and after the class.

After the whole class discussion the students then worked in groups of four or five to develop a set of interview questions that explored their use of social networking sites. Throughout this unit of work, and subsequently the study, the students not only explored social networking use, but also learnt about interview techniques and the concept of open and closed questions. In order to explore this research question I identified three areas that needed to be considered by the student researchers: Presentation of Identity; Online and Offline Identities; Friendships Online. Each group was given a piece of paper with the three topics listed above. They were asked to brainstorm and write down questions under each of these three headings. These
were then collected and collated. Observations and anecdotal notes were taken during this session.

I developed a final set of questions that included the set of questions that I had written, as well as some of the questions suggested by students. It became clear through the class discussion and the student devised questions that the main social networking site students used was Facebook (only two students in the class were not on Facebook). For this reason, the majority of the questions were based around this social networking site. This final set of questions was then presented back to the class to comment on. I read the first draft of interview questions out to the class and asked for their responses and thoughts. I then asked students to read through them again and put a tick next to the questions they agreed to include and a cross next to those they disagreed with or were not sure of. If they placed a cross, I asked for a small explanation so I could understand if and how it needed to be amended. This was also an opportunity to make sure the participants were clear on what each question was asking, so that questions, and hopefully answers, could be as unambiguous as possible. The final interview questions for users of social networking sites are in appendix 1.

Two of the participants were not users of a social networking site. I came up with a set of questions for the non-users, which I asked them to read through and comment on before finalising for the interviews. The main aim here was to establish why they were not a user of social networking sites and whether they thought they missed out on anything as a consequence. The interview questions for the non-users are in appendix 2.

The final stage was the interviews. Students worked with a partner and took turns in asking each other the questions. All students completed this task, but only those students who returned the consent forms were recorded. Interviews were recorded on school laptops, with microphones. Two sets of students recorded each other on their mobile phones, which I had approved the lesson before. The interviews took place in one classroom, however, this particular classroom had a small back room and corridor which two groups used to record, giving themselves some degree of privacy. During this time I ‘floated’ among the groups making sure the recording equipment was
working effectively and answering questions the participants may have had. The interviews took one fifty minute period.

Analysis

Following the whole class interview process, recordings of eight participants’ interviews were transcribed for analysis; two of these participants were not Facebook users. From this group of eight students, six students became the basis for six individual ‘pictures’ of participant use of social networking sites. The two who were left out were not Facebook users. The transcripts were closely analysed and, where possible, the information was categorised into one of five subject areas. These five subject areas emerged after reoccurring themes in the transcripts were identified. The subject areas identified were of particular importance to the study and are:

- **Peer Judgement**: includes statements that related to the participant judging or commenting on their own or other’s online behaviour.
- **Image Control**: includes statements about how participants represented their own image via Facebook.
- **Facebook Etiquette**: comments about online behaviour that is typical of or encouraged by the website.
- **Cybersafety**: includes statements about cybersafety and cyberbullying.
- **Ethically and Morally Right**: comments about ethical or moral online and offline behaviours. In a sense, it is about what the participants perceive is the right thing to do.

After this first stage of analysis, follow up interviews took place with the six participants who were the focus of the study. The purpose of the follow up interviews was to clarify answers that were difficult to understand in the first interviews and ask for more detailed answers to other questions. I interviewed each participant individually in a quiet environment. The follow up interviews took between 10 and 20 minutes for each participant.
In addition, the study had a ‘home’ page on a social networking site that was a point of contact for the students in the class. Given the popularity of Facebook among the class, a page was set up on this particular social networking site. Some students ‘friended’ the page, but no questions or comments were posted. The page was taken down after a month.

Each individual interacts with social networking in a complex manner. To answer the research question a picture of usage for each participant was developed. This picture drew from a number of sources: the transcripts, the follow up interviews, the class discussions and, if possible, the behaviour viewed on Facebook. While this method cannot provide all the answers, in the post-positivist tradition it seeks to ‘approximate’ a reality for each individual. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) acknowledge, ‘Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations for their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts or stories, about what they have done and why’ (p. 21). In the results section each participant is presented as an individual case, their actions, interactions and understandings are interpreted in order to determine the ways in which young people critically engage with social networking sites and to identify the factors that influence engagement. The analysis looked to identify similarities and differences between participants in order to address the research question.
Chapter 3: Results

Results are presented as individual descriptions of the six participants’ interaction with the social networking site Facebook. Each description begins with an italicised quote which stood out as emblematic of their interaction.

Sally

‘That’s the bad thing that people act differently in real life than they do online. Some people are nice in real life and then mean [online] and sometimes the other way round’.

Sally is an outgoing fourteen year old, who is popular with her peers. She has almost 600 friends on Facebook and, in the first interview, stated that she didn’t ‘go on everyday’, but when she does, she is on for ‘like half an hour to an hour’. She also uses Twitter, Form Spring and MSN ‘sometimes’, but only for ‘five – ten minutes’. By the time of the follow-up interview, Sally appeared disillusioned with Facebook. She admitted: ‘I never go on anymore…well not really’. She denied that this was due to the interviews, but because she ‘didn’t want to get involved’ with the widespread cyberbullying that was taking place on Facebook, which she described as ‘depressing’. Another reason for the disillusionment was ‘that people act differently in real life than they do online’, leading to feelings of confusion and betrayal. Overlaying this was Sally’s concern with how she might be judged.

Image representation on Facebook was a major concern for Sally. She admits that ‘photos are really important on Facebook’, because people ‘can judge you even if they don’t know you’. She oscillated from being very literal about the way photos on Facebook represent an identity, to showing some ability to be critical of the medium. For example, at one point she states, ‘if you have like you know a smiling photo with your friends they’ll be like “She looks really nice” or something’. However, in the follow up interview she does admit that ‘people could get the wrong idea because of their photos, especially if they don’t know them well’.
For Sally, image control was tied up with peer judgement. In her first interview she stated that she doesn’t ‘make too many status updates’ and that she just likes to read others. In the second interview, she explained why this is the case: ‘Some statuses are really bad like ‘I’m going to bed or whatever’ and people are like ‘who cares’ and like kind of I don’t want people to be like “That’s such a bad status”’. When asked if she was concerned by the judgements people would make of her statuses, she answered, ‘Yes’. She also mentioned that she does like it when people comment positively on her status, news and photos: ‘if they like my status I’m like yay you know. So and so liked my status and I’m like happy because I never really make statuses’. Sally seemed pleased that ‘she actually learnt how to put photos up for the first time’ and relieved that she now ‘knows what photos to put and what photos not to put up’.

Sally has learnt about cybersafety through school programs, but also discusses these issues with her older siblings. With her siblings the conversation turns into what not to do on Facebook. She described a situation in which a ‘friend’ uploaded a video of her without her permission. Her older sister found out and Sally reports: ‘she was like “Oh my God this is bad”’. Sally asked the friend to take the video down which they did, but she states ‘if they didn’t have my permission in the first place they really shouldn’t have done it’. When I asked Sally to tell me a little more about the video, she recalled that it wasn’t controversial in nature, more ‘embarrassing’. What was more significant for Sally was that her friend had transgressed Facebook etiquette by putting the video up without her permission. In matters of cybersafety and Facebook etiquette Sally has a clear sense of what is right and wrong. She says that she would never put ‘exposing photos, never in a bikini’ on Facebook because ‘that’s the wrong idea’. Her assurance here seems to, in part, stem from her older sister.

When asked whether there was pressure to be extroverted online she answered: ‘Facebook they’re always like “update your status”, “Look at this event coming up” and so and so’s birthday so they’re trying to make you…trying to get you to make statuses and put more information in’. And earlier in the interview she had this to say: ‘I guess Facebook would like people [to be] extroverts more because they’re helping the business and promoting it’. In these statements Sally can see how and why the site structures interaction and experience in a particular way.
Most of Sally’s critical engagement, however, was not based around the site itself, but the way her peers use Facebook. She seemed almost liberated by her revelation that people are not who they appear online, but this quickly turned to disappointment when she related it to the way people can be mean online. According to Sally, people can be ‘like the sheep just following’, particularly when someone is being mean. When asked whether people understood the cybersafety message she answered that they know it’s happening:

> In real life they will be like ‘oh it’s really bad’ but actually online they kind of have a different identity and like ‘ha ha ha that’s so funny’ and go along with it, but not really do something about it.

She believes there is a disjunction between what people admit to and what they actually do online.

Sally believes that some of her classmates were not telling the truth in the first interview: ‘Some people would say they don’t have provocative photos, but they do’. When I asked her why they felt they could not be honest with the interviewer or myself she replied:

> They don’t want to sound like they’re being inappropriate and stuff online to like a teacher or something…they don’t want to admit it to themselves.

This appears to be recurring theme in Sally’s interviews: what people say and how they behave are two different things, not only in the interviews, but also on Facebook. However, when I asked her whether she could tell her interview partner about her disillusionment with Facebook she replied: ‘Hmmmm …not really…oh kind of because like they might have an opinion on it and go and tell everybody’. Sally seemed anxious about how her personal identity, image and ideas were being interpreted on Facebook, as well as how to integrate a person’s online behaviour with their identity in the ‘real’ world.
Felicity

‘I’m more confident online ... I get really scared talking to people sometimes’.

Felicity is a dedicated student, whose intelligence is respected by her peers. She is quiet and thoughtful, but finds that she can become a far more confident person on Facebook, where she has almost 300 ‘friends’. She uses the site daily for around ‘half an hour to 15 minutes’, but this is mainly to ‘check on messages’. Felicity is aware of the way Facebook structures her experience, however, she seems grateful for the opportunities that it offers her: ‘I feel pretty happy on Facebook cos I don’t get out much’. She confesses to certain behaviours that she is not proud of, but assumes that it is part of the Facebook experience. For instance, she admits that she is ‘not intentionally mean’, but can be, and has tried ‘friending’ the ‘pretty, cool’ people.

Felicity is aware of how important your image is on Facebook. She sees the ‘friends’ people have on Facebook as key to this:

Well I have a few friends and they go around looking up different people and if they find someone who they think is hot or who looks good they add them, so it looks like they are more cool. Because mostly people would assume that pretty people are the cool people.

Even though Felicity acknowledges that the assumptions made are questionable she accepts it as what happens on Facebook:

You would try to add the more pretty and good looking people I guess. It’s just what you do. I don’t try to do that, but sometimes it slips up a bit.

She mentions several times that the photos of her on Facebook ‘are really, really ugly’ and ‘bad’ and that she is often ‘being weird’ in them. She attributes this to her ‘being caught off guard’ and hopes that we ‘never see them’. When asked if there were any inappropriate photos of her on Facebook she equates appropriateness with attractiveness: ‘Define inappropriate ... because I just have really, really ugly bad photos on’. She has 74 photos and images uploaded onto the site.
Felicity believes that the photos of her on Facebook ‘don’t help project any idea’ of who she is. She reasons that the identity she projects through Facebook photos is different to the person she is in the real world. However, later in the interview when asked what helps her to understand a person’s identity via a social network she answers: ‘photos I guess and probably your friends…but mainly photos’. She seemed nonplussed with the status function on Facebook: ‘I don’t post statuses that much …it’s not that important everyone talks about the same things’. She also admits that there is ‘pressure to be extroverted online’. However, Felicity is all too aware of the benefits that Facebook afford her.

When asked whether she would prefer to talk to people face to face or over Facebook Felicity initially answered face to face ‘because … you can see their reactions and what they’re doing’. However, it became clear that her real answer was actually the opposite: ‘yeah face to face is not what I prefer’. She confessed to ‘closer bonds’ with people online because ‘you can barely talk about anything offline and you talk about everything online’. She often felt ‘awkward’ talking in person and more ‘confident’ online because she gets ‘really scared talking to people sometimes’. Felicity is a naturally reserved girl, but she can ‘write’ herself into a more extroverted and assertive persona through Facebook – she can ‘tell the world anything’. Despite being more social and confident on Facebook, Felicity believes that the she is ‘still the same person online, offline and what I was ages ago so it hasn’t affected it (identity) at all, unlike some people’.

Even though Felicity uses Facebook daily several incidents indicate that she is not as experienced as she first appears. She describes an instance where she ‘accidentally’ reported her friend to the Facebook administration. She reports ‘I didn’t know what it [the function of reporting] did, they didn’t explain anything’. As a result of this mistake she ‘got into a bit of trouble’ with her friend. She also reports that she is a ‘good girl’ and has ‘privacy settings’. However, her Facebook page shows that her privacy settings are low – all her friends are listed, as well as her age, school and quite a bit of personal information. What’s more she appears unsure about what information she has secured: ‘I guess it only shows my birthday, my school, my name and that’s about it’. Felicity’s view of other people’s behaviour on Facebook is rather positive.
She claims that she has ‘not at all witnessed cyberbullying’ and can’t understand ‘why there would be cyberbullying everywhere’ because ‘mostly everyone is really nice’. She also sees Facebook as a relatively consequence free environment: ‘there’s no one there to judge you or anything, they may judge you online but you can just log out and it will be fine’. Despite some scepticism, Felicity has much invested in her use of Facebook; it is a place where her ideal version of self can be written into being.

**Nadia**

‘...*people who don’t write statuses don’t put on photos what’s the point of having Facebook?*’

Nadia is an expressive and animated thirteen year old who uses Facebook daily, as well as ‘Form Spring and Tumblr sometimes’. She goes onto Facebook to check her notifications but will then ‘leave it on in the background in case someone’s on chat and wants to ask me something or like D&M’. She sees posting statuses and uploading photos as the main purpose of Facebook and can’t understand why an ‘introverted and really shy’ person would use the social networking site, ‘unless [they’re] stalking other people’ which she describes as ‘a bit weird’. When asked whether it could be used for organising social events, she answered: ‘Not really then you have email…or phone or whatever’. Nadia believes that you should only add friends that you know: ‘I like only add people I know so I have like 300ish friends’. However, she does accept people that she has met only once ‘because it’s mean not to’.

For Nadia, a person’s Facebook identity is best understood by ‘their photo, whether they go on a lot, whether they write a lot of statuses and what their statuses are’. She believes that a person’s photos are ‘really important’ because it ‘helps to know who that person is’. For example, if there is a photo of someone studying then ‘you’re like, are you smart?...But if someone has ones of them partying [then they are] outgoing’. Despite this, she believes that ‘you don’t really need Facebook to know people’s identity because you don’t add people you don’t know’. Nadia doesn’t think that her use of Facebook has affected her offline identity, but associates the evolution of her online identity with the increase in the number of friends she has:
When I first got it I was in grade six and had five friends because no one had it then. But now you have more, and more and more people are getting it and you can talk more and it’s better.

She is happy with the structure of Facebook and believes ‘they can’t do anything else, everything is on there, you can chat, write on people’s walls, so it’s good’.

Nadia finds that Facebook helps her organise her friendships and refine the way her image and identity are represented. She confesses that she categorises her friends into groups on chat. She explains:

You can go offline to some people and still be online for some people. I do that a lot. I know it sounds really mean.

Nadia believes that ‘a lot of people’ use this function. In her opinion, ‘why would they have it if people didn’t do it?’ However, she will sometimes bring this up in offline conversations if someone does the same thing to her:

Sometimes you talk about what someone said or you’re like “Hey why don’t you reply I want to chat” or something.

Nadia cites one of the ‘best things’ about Facebook:

If you don’t want to talk to somebody and they’re like “Hey what’s up?” Then you can just close the window or “Be right back” and then if they’re like “Why didn’t you talk to me?” you’d be like “Sorry I didn’t get your message…oh Facebook”.

Here she is able to pass off her ‘mean’ behaviour as a Facebook problem. She compares this with interactions in the real world: ‘if someone comes up to you you have to talk to them’. Furthermore for Nadia, communicating online is ‘sometimes’ easier because you ‘can sound really smart or say – you think about what you’re writing not just say it’ and there are no ‘awkward pauses’. Facebook offers her greater ability to control her friendships and construct her identity.
Nadia has learnt about cyberbullying at school where she explains ‘we had people come in and like brochures and stuff’, but she does not talk about these issues with her parents. She seems to think that people can be mean online: ‘If someone says something mean or whatever and people are like “Ha, ha so funny” it’s not, because the other person feels like… I don’t know’. However, she is not convinced that this is cyberbullying and thinks if it was reported ‘Facebook is just going to be like “whatever”…’ When her interview partner asked the question ‘Are you more likely to be mean to people online?’ she added, ‘The truth Nadia’. Despite this searching addendum, Nadia seemed adamant that she is ‘not mean to people’ on Facebook. In fact, she wanted to distance herself from such behaviour: ‘Some people are mean but it’s not really anything to do with me’. She believes that there is little difference between online and offline behaviour explaining if people are mean online then ‘they’ll say it to your face as well’. At various times in the interview Nadia seemed uncomfortable when answering the questions. At one point she responded with, ‘I don’t know, that’s a stupid question’ and later ‘I didn’t even get that question’.

Cassie

’Sometimes I put selfies on because, I don’t know I just do, because I’m just an idiot’.

Cassie is a self-confessed extrovert, describing herself as ‘outgoing, confident, loud’. She acknowledges ‘some would say’ she is an ‘annoying person’. She uses a variety of social networking sites: ‘Facebook mostly, Form Spring, Twitter and MySpace’, but says that she doesn’t ‘really spend that long’ on them. When on Facebook, she looks to chat with friends, but can be selective: ‘I just go on Facebook to chat or like if there is no one on there that I really want to talk to … I just go off’. She has between 100-200 ‘friends’ and says that most of them are from school, but only some of these friends she sees on the weekend or on holidays.

Cassie has definite ideas about how your image should be represented on Facebook: ‘I think they’re [photos] important and everything but you don’t really need heaps of them. Some people have 600 and stuff but I don’t think you need that many’. Instead, Cassie believes if you have ‘one good photo and some friends and stuff’ that is enough. She describes herself as an ‘idiot’ for putting ‘selfies’ (self portraits) on
Facebook, but explains: ‘it’s kind of stupid but like it looks good kind of, it’s the cool thing to do now’. Her status updates are about a variety of things: ‘Well sometimes mine are like “I love you whoever” and then sometimes they’re just like stupid ones’. Cassie says that she ‘feels good’ when people comment on her status because it makes her ‘feel better’ about herself. However, if people make ‘mean comments like “you look fugly”’ then it’s a different matter. In this scenario Cassie takes control: ‘as I said if they’re going to mean I’m just like “Okay well I don’t want to be your friend”’. Despite this, she claims ‘no one’s ever really done that [be mean]’ to her.

Cassie has learnt about cybersafety through ‘primary school’ and ‘a bit this year’ in Health education, but does not report talking about these issues with her parents. She doesn’t normally add strangers as ‘friends’, but explains that she did once:

This guy was like a creepy paedophile. And then he was like being weird and then he’s like I want to meet you … and I’m like de-friend.

As a result of this experience she is ‘really careful’ and doesn’t ‘just add people for the sake of it’. She describes adding people for ‘more friends’ as ‘stupidly dumb’. Cassie only puts some information on Facebook including her school and the suburb she lives in, but doesn’t put her phone number on ‘because random paedophiles call you’.

Cassie uses a variety of factors to understand a person’s identity, including ‘their status, their photos’ and when ‘they’re talking to you on chat’. She describes herself as more extroverted in the offline world because she ‘can’t be as loud’ online. In fact, she seems more comfortable in the offline world in general:

I prefer to talk to them face to face because when you’re on social networking you can’t really tell if their being sarcastic or they’re trying to be mean or anything but face to face you can see their body language… you can hear exactly what they’re saying.

For Cassie an online friend is different to an offline friend because some people try to be ‘more mature’ and ‘sophisticated’ on Facebook. This can make things confusing
when you meet them and they are ‘not as mature’ as the identity they projected. Cassie thinks that people are ‘mean on social networking’ because they ‘don’t have the balls to say it to their [your] face’. Cassie herself does not try to be ‘deliberately’ mean to people online, but admits that ‘people can get the wrong idea’.

Cassie believes that there is pressure to be extroverted online: ‘I think there is more pressure to be extroverted online because you have to make more like – more for people to like you’. She thinks that things are different in the offline world because ‘people just like you’. Cassie associates the evolution of her online identity with the way her image is represented:

Okay well my online identity it has evolved because when I first got Facebook there was only like one picture of me and it was like a really bad one…so now there’s like more pictures, and there’s better looking pictures.

**Phillipa**

‘Well sometimes you’ll add people that you’ve met but you aren’t actually like close with them…on Facebook if you know who they are then that’s kind of counted as a friend’.

Phillipa is a reserved girl who has been using Facebook for a year. She has over 300 friends that were transferred across from msn messenger when she signed up. This, she explains, is how she’s ‘gotten so many [friends] pretty quickly’. Phillipa is on Facebook for about three hours a week. She uploads photos, but ‘[doesn’t] usually put statuses on’. If she does her statuses are ‘about things that … [she’s] looking forward to’. She finds it easier to ‘talk’ to people on Facebook than the phone, as it involves ‘a lot less hassle’. In contrast, Phillipa finds the phone ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘awkward’.

Peer judgement on Facebook is a concern for Phillipa. Consequently, she describes herself as less confident online, particularly when making statuses: ‘I’m always worried about what I write other people might read it and be like “What on earth is she writing that for?”’. For this reason she ‘takes more notice of what …[she’s] writing and …putting up’, because she knows ‘people will be judging it’. Phillipa
believes that photos on Facebook are ‘fairly important’. She explains: ‘if people are looking to add you as a friend they would look at them to see what kind of things you do’. Similarly, she looks at ‘photos’ and ‘what kind of friends’ a person has to understand other people’s online identity. Despite this she acknowledges that Facebook photos are not always an accurate representation of who a person is:

People will put photos on because they think it will make them look cooler, but then that’s not actually what they’re like they just do it because they think it makes them look good.

To Phillipa looking good in photos is about photos ‘with heaps of people so it shows “I hang out with heaps of friends”’. However, socialising with so many friends may be ‘just a one off thing’ for some people.

Controlling how her image is represented on Facebook is another concern for Phillipa. When she first started using Facebook a lot of her friends commented on the fact that she didn’t ‘have many photos’, so she ‘started to get more’. She explains she ‘wouldn’t want bad photos … for everyone to see’. Despite her best attempts, she has ‘had photos that aren’t very good’ uploaded. When asked whether she has had any inappropriate photos on Facebook, she recalls these photos where she ‘looks really bad’. Peer judgement can make it difficult to know which photos of you and your friends to upload. Phillipa considers her friends closely in this situation: ‘You kind of know if it’s appropriate by thinking “Who are my friends, if they see it what will they think?”’

Phillipa acknowledges that a lot of people find Facebook can become a ‘competition to see who has more friends’. For this reason people might feel the pressure:

For some people I think there would be [pressure], but I don’t really care whether people think I should have friends or not because it’s not really their opinion that should matter.

Phillipa states that she will only ‘add people that [she] knows. However, there are a complex network of pressures at play that are sometimes difficult to negotiate:
'Sometimes there is pressure like if you’ve got a lot of like mutual friends with them …then you might think maybe I should friend them because then I can be like “Oh yeah I know this person I’ve got them on Facebook”. But then sometimes you just don’t because you think:“Why would I even want to have you? Why would I want you to see all my things? I only add people who I am comfortable with seeing what I have put up.

Phillipa still feels uncomfortable if one of her ‘friends’ is commenting on and looking at her photos. She begins to feel ‘self-conscious’ wondering ‘Do they like my photos?’

Phillipa is satisfied with the structure of Facebook: ‘I don’t really think there is anything that you can’t do or nothing that I have wanted to do and can’t’. She thinks that people can be ‘more extroverted’ online, but it is mainly ‘people’s choice’ to be this way. She has ‘not witnessed cyberbullying’, however, she does acknowledge that ‘you’re more likely to be mean but without doing it on purpose’. Phillipa admits it is easier to be mean when ‘there’s no immediate consequence’. According to Phillipa people also lie on Facebook. She claims lies might be about ‘their age if they want people to take them seriously’ and sometimes even about which school they attend. For example, some people might write they ‘go to a private school’, but ‘only then if [they’re] desperate’. However, there are recriminations for lies like this:

When people find out they get like really angry at them and then a lot of people kind of like stop being friends with them or well they’re still friends with them they just kind of don’t look at them in the same way.

**Nina**

‘*I think at the start I was quite introverted and sort of conservative, but as I’ve become more confident and more comfortable with the networking site and in myself, I’ve become more extroverted.*’
Nina is an articulate and confident girl who has definite opinions about the way Facebook should be used. She checks her account ‘most nights’ to ‘keep up with everything and talk to people’. Nina also ‘puts lots of photos up’ of herself with friends, but doesn’t ‘really like to upload “selfies” (self portraits)’. She believes that it is ‘a bit weird if you’ve got a lot of pictures of just yourself’ and that you could come across as ‘self obsessed’. According to Nina most people have the ‘cyber-sense’ to avoid uploading a lot of ‘selfies’, but she still admits that ‘there are a couple of people who … just spend time taking pictures of themselves cos they can’. She will ‘generally make a status a day’, often about ‘a funny moment’ or to ‘let everyone know how your day was or mention that you’re with someone’.

While Nina sees the benefits in having photos on Facebook, she also recognises that they can be deceptive. She explains: ‘it’s good to have photos on Facebook … if you go on a holiday or something to show people where you went and what you did’. She also uses photos to understand other people’s online identity: ‘It can make you look like a bad person if you have photos up of inappropriate things’. Despite this, she also believes ‘you can put things up that don’t show who you really are and that are quite deceptive of what you actually do’. For this reason Nina doesn’t think that photos ‘are as important as a lot of people think they are’. Nevertheless, she still acknowledges that even ‘subconsciously’ people judge others by their photos:

I think people are really judgemental on like Facebook and stuff because of the photos and the statuses and, if say your friend tagged you in a photo where you looked really bad and people might judge you and be like she’s really weird.

She feels that the way your image is represented is beyond your control. She explains, ‘the best you can do is ask the person to take it [the photo] down’ or ‘un-tag yourself’. As a result, Nina believes that ‘it’s important to sort of censor what you put up and decide whether it is appropriate or not’.

Nina explains that she hasn’t ‘personally’ been ‘involved in cyber-bullying’ but has heard about it. She learnt about cybersafety at school, but her parents seem more influential in this regard:
My parents made me set out ground rules…[they] talked to me about what they expect of me and what they like believe is right and what I believe is appropriate, but also school has played a really major part.

Despite this, Nina’s privacy settings are quite low and some personal information is publicly displayed. While she might not have been involved in cyberbullying Nina thinks that ‘it’s easier to be mean to people…online for the reason that bullies feel safe behind a computer screen’. In the second interview she also described bullying on another social networking site called Form Spring. As Nina explains, on Form Spring you can ask questions or post comments anonymously, but anonymity often leads to cyberbullying because people post ‘stupid, hateful stuff’ that is ‘really really bad’. Nina explains that these posts are sometimes ‘printscreened’ and uploaded onto Facebook. She recalls numerous cases at school ‘that she has been asked about by teachers’, where ‘girls have been bullied to an extent that they feel depressed’.

Nina has over 400 friends on Facebook, but makes the following admission:

I am probably at the stage where I need to go through my Facebook friends and delete people … I don’t even want to know what they’re doing.

She believes having too many ‘friends’ can become unmanageable and mean that you ‘lose the purpose of the social networking site’. In an earlier interview she says that she will add people that she has just met, in order to become better friends with them, but doesn’t ‘add random people’ because ‘that’s weird’. She feels that ‘there’s a bit of pressure to be extroverted’ on Facebook and that it ‘can be viewed as a popularity contest’, but Nina sees it as ‘a way to connect with people and communicate’. Over time, she has become ‘more confident and more comfortable with new people’ on Facebook, leading to her being more ‘extroverted’ online. Despite this, she believes that her offline identity is unchanged: ‘I don’t let social networking sites affect who I am. If there’s something bad that happens I don’t really let it get to me’.

Nina acknowledges that people do lie on Facebook:
Some people tell white lies to get attention and to make themselves seem cooler or to get sympathy… I think they are made by people who are insecure…reassurance that’s really what people look for.

Overall, Nina is happy with the structure of Facebook and what it offers her:

I think Facebook sort of really lets you do a lot. There’s nothing that really restricts you…there’s nothing that holds you back.
Chapter 4: Discussion

There are three main points that I would like to explore in the discussion. First, I picture Facebook as a ‘Room of Mirrors’; a place where peer judgement and image control are in a perpetual feedback loop, making it difficult for the participants to experiment and explore their own unique identity. Such a medium leaves little room for Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium as there is now an imperative for the self to be reflexive. Second, while the participants used Facebook in different ways, the usage reported in the current study did not appear improvised or creative. Instead, behaviours and experience were adapted to suit the medium in the goal for greater cultural capital in this field. On several occasions participants contradicted what they had been taught in cybersafety classes, or what they knew to be morally right, as the drive to maintain or improve their status superseded all else. Some were well aware of the contradiction. Felicity, for example, seemed resigned to the fact that this is what happens on Facebook. Bourdieu describes this ‘commitment to the logic, values and capital of a field’ as illusio (Webb, et al., 2002, p. 26). In the final section of this chapter, I view each participant’s use of Facebook in light of illusio, and put forward Foucault’s discursive formation as an explanation for why particular behaviours are acted out.

Critical engagement appeared to be an illusive idea for many of the participants. For most participants, it was important to report that they were doing the ‘right’ thing, which at times, meant being critical, even though they often contradicted this later in their interview. Consistency in a participant’s answers was often difficult to find. What did emerge was that a young person’s online identity was often quite different to the person they believed they were in the real world, however, this was seldom acknowledged. In my summary, only two of the participants seemed to approach Facebook in a critical manner, but this approach was not always maintained. Apart from a few minor changes none of the participants thought that Facebook should do anything differently. In Nina’s words, ‘there’s nothing that I’d like to do on Facebook that I can’t do already’.
All the participants acknowledged that photos and friends are instrumental in representing your identity on Facebook. There also seemed to be some anxiety about what sort of photos to put up, as photos are judged by your ‘friends’. For example, Sally said now she knows ‘what photos to put up and what photos not to put up’; Felicity suggested all of her 74 photos were ‘really, really, ugly, bad photos’ and Phillipa sometimes feels ‘self-conscious’ wondering whether her friends will like her photos. Sally, Felicity, Phillipa and Nina all acknowledged that photos can be an inaccurate representation of who a person is and in this way are engaging critically with an aspect of the site. However, here critical engagement is directed at participants’ Facebook ‘friends’ rather than the site itself. Despite expressing doubt over the ‘truthfulness’ of photos, all participants relied on them to represent their own identity and understand others’ identities. Like a room of mirrors, images of self are projected on Facebook, but are also bounced back to reflect an identity constructed by others.

Status updates were also a source of anxiety for Sally and Phillipa. Both were ‘worried’ about what to write because they felt they might be judged; as a result they rarely post statuses. Nadia on the other hand thinks that communicating on Facebook can be easier because you can ‘sound really smart’. On Facebook, positive comments and ‘likes’ from ‘friends’ in response to your posts were essential reassurance for the quality of your posts and, more generally, your online identity. Scientist Baroness Greenfield believes that the Facebook and Twitter generation have developed a ‘child like desire for reassurance’ that has left users with an ‘identity crisis’ (Orr, 2011). The participants in this study did seem reliant on their friends to affirm their online identity, and for some this led to anxiety, but whether this will lead to an identity crisis is yet to be determined and is beyond the scope of the current study.

Who you are friends with on Facebook is also important. According to Felicity, some of her friends will search out the ‘pretty, cool’ people and try to be friends with them. Even though she tries not to, Felicity admitted that sometimes she ‘slips up a bit’ and will do the same. No doubt this is because she knows that she will be judged by her list of Facebook ‘friends’. Sally seemed disillusioned by her friendships on Facebook
people who she thought she knew had disappointed her with their meanness. According to Sally, bullying and meanness were rife on Facebook. Indeed all the participants except Nadia\(^2\) experienced judgment or meanness or both on Facebook. Such mean behaviour seems instigated by the ability to judge others which, seemed to the participants, just part of the Facebook experience.

Erikson’s (1971) idea of the psychosocial moratorium – a time when adolescents can indulge in some ‘role experimentation’ (p. 157) in a relatively consequence free environment – would be difficult for the participants in this study given what they reported. There is an obligation to relay their experiences and their burgeoning sense of self to their peers via Facebook, and as we have seen this can be quite a judgemental environment. So if the psychosocial moratorium is diminished or absent for these young people what are they missing? In his reading of Erikson, Welchmann (2000) explains that during the psychosocial moratorium adolescents go through a period of ‘identity confusion’ in the transition from childhood to adulthood, but the psychosocial moratorium, a ‘socially sanctioned period’ allows them to ‘flounder and explore before settling on a more permanent identity’ (p. 54). The young adult emerges from this period with an ideology or ‘defined world image’ (Erikson, 1965, p. 254) that enables them to find some sense of order and direction. This drive for ideology can make them ‘susceptible to the exploitation of totalitarian creeds, which offer a world view rather than simple commandments’ (Welchmann, 2000, p. 54).

Writing in the 1960s Erikson’s concept of a ‘totalitarian creed’ would be quite different to ours, but if we consider it in light of identity formation, then for young people today Facebook could be depicted as a dominant tool. In this way Facebook primes the user to view and interact with the world and others in a particular manner.

Psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg uses the term ‘waiting room’ to describe the period between childhood and adulthood. In essence it is a similar concept to Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium, however, he sees more direct learning taking place: ‘In the waiting room you learned important coping skills like anger management, problem solving, decision making, conflict resolution’ (Money, 2010, p. 20). The teenagers he sees in his clinic have not learnt these skills and ‘are utterly worn out by depression,'

\(^2\) Nadia, however, reported that she herself had been involved in deceptive behaviour and categorises her friends into groups which she described as ‘mean’.
anxiety, eating disorders, drug and alcohol problems’ (p. 20). He believes that ‘internet addiction and mobile phone-bullying are a big part of what [he] deals with’, with ‘90 percent of their [all teenagers] socialising done online’ (p. 20). For the young people that I spoke to Facebook does not give them the space to make mistakes and experiment as peer judgement, and consequently, meanness and bullying seemed endemic. They were in a continual cycle of representation and adjustment with little time to reflect and experiment. This fits nicely with Giddens’ idea of the reflexive self; someone who is continually self-monitoring, reflecting and adjusting to attain self-improvement. As quoted in Chapter 2, Giddens writes ‘…we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). The concept of the ‘reflexive self’ is not in itself damaging. However, asking a thirteen year old to self-improve could be problematic when it is likely she has not developed a sense of self to even improve on. What’s more the reflex or cycle for adjustment seems to snowball on a medium like Facebook, which is based around representation and feedback.

The idea of Facebook being a room of mirrors has repercussions for researching young people and technology. In Chapter 3, I outlined the need for an approach which implicated young people in the research process; one that ensured they were active participants who were not ‘exoticised’(Herring, 2008) by the study. I still maintain that this is an important element in researching young people and technology, but what this study revealed was that young people themselves are each other’s biggest critics when it comes to Facebook. If it is indeed a room of mirrors, then expressing how you really behave and feel about your use of Facebook to a friend (most likely a Facebook ‘friend’) in an interview might be quite confronting and result in misleading answers. This was evident when Sally was asked whether she felt comfortable discussing her disillusionment with Facebook with her partner. She answered: ‘Hmmm…not really…oh kind of because like they might have an opinion on it and go and tell everybody’.

‘How am I supposed to be?’ (Branaman, 2010, p. 139)

At first glance the participants in the study seem to use Facebook for slightly different reasons. Habitus, the individual disposition or matrix each participant embodies and brings to their experience of Facebook, in part, explains these differences. For
example, Nina uses it to ‘keep up with everything and talk to people’, whereas Felicity writes her ideal self into being through Facebook where she is more ‘confident’ and shares ‘closer bonds’ with her peers. Nadia, on the other hand, believes Facebook is for presenting your identity to the world: ‘people who don’t write statuses, don’t put photos up, what’s the point of having Facebook?’ Here, patterns of use can tell us something about an individual’s habitus, as according to Jenkins (2002), ‘habitus only operates in relation to a social field’ (p. 82).

Felicity is a shy and quiet girl, but on Facebook she becomes a more confident and extroverted version of herself. Nina uses it as a tool to keep up with what’s going on. Cassie seems wary of Facebook. Her preference for face-to-face communication seemed to come from a previous online experience that left her anxious about how she was being received by others. When asked more specifically about whether she had been bullied on Facebook, she was so defensive in her denial that I began to wonder whether there was more to this issue. Nadia, an exacting and, at times, judgemental character, presents herself to the world and organises her friends to suit her social needs. While she acknowledges that such behaviour could be seen as ‘mean’ she calibrates her actions according to the medium’s capabilities: ‘I think a lot of people do that, like a lot, of people cause why would they have it if people didn’t do it?’ By and large these are only subtle variations in usage. None of the participants mentioned embedding videos, linking to blogs or other Web 2.0 technologies, or even organising social events through Facebook – they simply re/present themselves through photos and status updates. With Livingstone’s (2008) study in mind, I suggest that online practises are ‘deeply embedded’ (p. 396) in the daily life of the participants. However, it could also be suggested that they were not aware of a more nuanced continuum of online and offline as outlined by Livingstone in the same study. Instead, participants maintained a more simplistic distinction between being online and offline, with little acknowledgement of the influence online practices have on their identity.

While habitus allows for improvisation and creativity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), none of the participants reported engaging with the field of Facebook in such a way. The reason why participants use Facebook in such a limited way might be partly explained by what the participants considered cultural capital in this field. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is ‘all the goods material and symbolic… that present
themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation (Bourdieu in Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990, p. 1). The amount of power a person has in any field is dependent upon their position and the amount of cultural capital they possess (Webb, et al., 2002, p. 23).

What is cultural capital in the field of Facebook? Examining the collective habitus of the participants tells us something about what counts as valuable or worth aspiring to in this particular social field. All the participants agree that there is pressure to have a lot of friends and to appear cool, but what ‘cool’ is can be unclear. Cassie, for example, describes herself as an ‘idiot’ because she uploads ‘selfies’ (self portraits). Later she tries to justify this: ‘it’s kind of stupid but it looks good kind of, it’s the cool thing to do now’. On the other hand, Nina believes that ‘it is a bit weird if you’ve got a lot of pictures of yourself’ and that you could come across as ‘self-obsessed’. It becomes a fine line between presenting yourself and showing off; another source of anxiety for users. Despite this, cultural capital in this social field seemed to be based on how many friends you have, who your friends are and how they look, how you look in photos, and to a lesser degree, what statuses you upload. Such pressure pushes young people to desperate measures. One participant mentioned a site that a lot of her friends used for a while where you can alter photos to make your skin more tanned and your teeth whiter. The desire to improve cultural capital and therefore improve social status, led to the participants engaging in behaviour they knew to be questionable. For example, some participants report they are more likely to be mean or judgemental online, while others become more superficial and overly concerned with their appearance and the appearance of others.

One thing that emerged from the interviews was that it was important to say that you ‘know’ your Facebook ‘friends’. At this point, it is worthwhile re-visiting the definition of ‘friend’. According to The Free Dictionary online, a friend is ‘a person whom one knows, likes, and trusts’ (Farlex, 2011). Nadia, Phillipa, Cassie and Felicity explicitly stated that they only have Facebook ‘friends’ they know, however, each showed some contradictions later in their interview. Cassie, for example, recounted a story where she added a man she did not know who, to her surprise, wanted to meet up with her. Phillipa said that she will only add people that she ‘knows’ and that she doesn’t ‘really care whether people think I should have friends or not’. However, in
the follow up interview she reveals some inconsistencies in this sentiment: ‘Sometimes there is pressure like if you’ve got a lot of like mutual friends with them …then you might think maybe I should friend them because then I can be like oh yeah I know this person I’ve got them on Facebook’. Initially Nadia declared ‘you don’t really need Facebook to know people’s identity because you don’t add people you don’t know’. However, in the follow up interview Nadia said that she felt ‘mean’ if she didn’t add people who had requested her as a ‘friend’ on Facebook. In some cases she had only met these people once. Nina also admitted that you can have so many Facebook ‘friends’ that you ‘lose the purpose of the social networking site’.

Interestingly, when I began the research page on Facebook I explained what it was for and sent out a few ‘friend’ requests to girls in the class. Two girls accepted the invitation, but later sent me messages asking ‘Who are you?’ This demonstrates a couple of things: firstly that it is fairly common practice to add people you do not know to your list of ‘friends’; and secondly, that some were not listening in class.

One can only presume that cybersafety classes and discussion with parents and teachers would have touched on this very topic: you don’t add strangers on Facebook. Similarly, what we teach in school and society is that friends are people you know and trust; they are more valuable than acquaintances. For these participants the concept of ‘friend’ is reduced on Facebook to the point where it takes on a new meaning. The danger is that friendships become commodities in an attempt to sell your identity to others. On Facebook it is better to have hundreds of ‘friends’, even though you may not know who your ‘friends’ are. Here we can see the drive for cultural capital overshadows the educational and moral lessons these participants would be familiar with. This might explain why participants say one thing (the thing they think is ‘right’), but do another. Jenkins (2002) notes that ‘the habitus is inculcated as much, if not more by experience as by explicit teaching’ (p. 76). This indeed seems to be what is happening here – the experience of social networking eclipses what had been taught in cybersafety classes. While habitus can be conceived of as a ‘transposable matrix’ that sets limits, it also implies flexibility. Despite this ‘dispositions are inevitably reflective of the social context in which they were acquired’ (Reay, 2004, p. 435).

Given the young age and lack of experience of the participants the social context of Facebook sets the bar for relationships on social networking sites and even changes what we think of as a friend. A billboard featured around Melbourne in 2010 was a
list of New Year’s resolutions, one of which was ‘Get to know all my friends on Facebook’. This billboard encapsulates the paradox of Facebook – the very definition of friend is compromised by the sheer quantity that one is expected to have.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that all the participants describe judgement, meanness and sometimes bullying on Facebook. It is clear that the participants know that this is wrong, but according to Nina ‘it’s easier to be mean to people…online’. Sally explains the phenomenon: ‘In real life they will be like “oh it’s really bad” but actually online they kind of have a different identity and like “ha ha ha that’s so funny” and go along with it, but not really do something about it’. Nadia also thinks people tend to just go along with it: ‘If someone says something mean or whatever and people are like “ha ha so funny” it’s not because the other person feels like …I don’t know’. Felicity admits that while she is ‘not usually mean on Facebook it comes out once or twice’ and this, she believes, is because ‘you have a screen in front of you and no one there’. Cassie admitted that while she does not try to be ‘deliberately’ mean online, ‘people can get the wrong idea’. It seems that there is something about the medium which leads users to do things they might later regret.

This was a major topic in class discussions and certain members of the class were particularly vocal about the issue. Ultimately, they attributed the increase in bullying online to delayed consequences and losing your inhibitions in a comfortable environment, behind the computer screen and in your own home. This phenomenon can be linked to Bolter and Grusin’s idea of ‘transparent immediacy’, which is ‘a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, pp. 272-273). Bolter and Grusin might say that the time of immediacy for the Facebook user has passed and given rise to a ‘hypermediated self’; one that is ‘networked’ and oscillating ‘between media’ and ‘windows’(Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 236). However, given what the participants describe, something akin to ‘transparent immediacy’ takes place when a Facebook user logs on to the site. The world of Facebook becomes immersive and the boundaries of the medium are blurred, as the user is directed by the technology rather than what they know to be morally or ethically right. This reminds me of a quote by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. He explains that Facebook ‘…has always tried to push the envelope. And at times that means stretching people and getting them to
be comfortable with things they aren’t comfortable with yet. A lot of this is just social norms catching up with what technology is capable of” (Thomson, 2008). Indeed, Facebook does ask its users to stretch – stretch their idea of what it means to be a ‘friend’ and stretch what they might consider to be normal, moral behaviour. Such ‘stretching’ becomes easier when you forget or change your critical faculties in an environment that is immersive and immediate.

Out of all the participants Nina and Sally were the most frank when it came to discussions about the sort of behaviours that take place on Facebook. They both mentioned that teachers had talked to them about incidents of bullying online. Sally, in particular was disillusioned with the fact ‘that people act differently in real life than they do online’ and had stopped using Facebook as much. Sally did not seem to be a ‘fish in water’ when using Facebook and in the interviews we can see that this is creating a new awareness in her; she describes it as ‘boring’ and ‘not even that good’. Here there appears to be a mismatch between behaviour promoted by Facebook and Sally’s habitus; something that is causing her some doubt. Despite this she admits that she could not leave Facebook altogether.

Interestingly, several of the participants were hesitant to directly describe any questionable or harmful behaviour taking place on Facebook and all participants believed that there was nothing the creators could do to improve their experience. Perhaps asking young people to engage with the site in this way is unrealistic. My view of their behaviour is no doubt coloured by my training as an English teacher. To me, critically engaging with any text is an essential skill that I try to instil in my students. When confronted with such positive descriptions of the Facebook experience I bridle. Put into perspective it may well be something that the participants will acquire with age. Either way, it appears the participants have an allegiance to Facebook, which may affect their ability to engage with it critically.

An unthinking commitment to Facebook?

Nadia and Felicity both describe incidents where there was meanness and judgement on Facebook. However, when asked more directly about cyberbullying – no doubt a more serious description of the behaviour – neither wanted to implicate Facebook or
their friends in the matter. For example, Felicity says that she has ‘not at all witnessed cyberbullying’ and can’t understand ‘why there would be cyberbullying everywhere’ because ‘mostly everyone is really nice’. Further to this she adds ‘there’s no one there to judge you or anything, they may judge you online but you can just log out and it will be fine’. For Felicity, Facebook is a place where she can write her ideal self into being; she has too much to lose by criticising the medium. Nadia thinks people are ‘mean’ online, but believes that ‘if they say it online they’ll say it to your face as well’. This response seems quite naïve and contrary to what most of the other participants describe. In a later response Nadia obfuscates the cybersafety question somewhat: ‘I don’t know the definition of cyberbullying; some people are mean, but it’s not like anything to do with me’. As mentioned, all the participants felt that there was nothing that Facebook could do to improve the website, in Nadia’s words ‘everything is on there’. It seems the participants hesitate to implicate Facebook in any of the negative things that take place – it is the behaviours of the user that are to blame. One explanation may be that there is an allegiance to Facebook that prevents participants from critically engaging with the medium. Bourdieu might describe this as illusio at work.

The ‘more or less unthinking commitment to the logic, values and capital of a field corresponds to what Bourdieu calls illusio’ (Webb, et al., 2002, p. 26). Although there were moments where the participants were critical of behaviours that took place on Facebook, no one was critical of the role that Facebook played. I got the overwhelming sense that the participants felt there was no way out from Facebook. Sally, for example, was disappointed with Facebook, and described some of the behaviours as ‘depressing’, but later when asked if she was ‘happy’ when using Facebook she replied, ‘Yeah…I guess. But when you see people being really mean I feel really bad for that person’. Sally mentioned that she wasn’t using Facebook as much as she used to and her friends had something to say about it: ‘everyone’s like “Why don’t you go on Facebook?” and its like it’s not even that good, well it is but…like I only go on to like communicate’. This was as close as any of the participants came to openly criticising Facebook. All the participants mentioned that there was a particular way to do things on Facebook, an unwritten set of rules, what Nina called ‘cybersense’. But when asked, no one questioned the role that Facebook plays in shaping their social networking experience. Instead, each participant
appeared committed to accruing friends, posting photos where they looked ‘good’ and writing interesting status updates; essentially things which translated to cultural capital in this field. As Bourdieu explains ‘if the structures of the game are not in your mind, the quarrel [over capital] will seem ridiculous and futile to you’ (Bourdieu, 1998 pp. 76-77). Indeed, explaining to someone the desire to have more Facebook friends - even though you may not speak or see these friends - does seem strange. If illusio accounts for this commitment - a commitment that often contradicted other things participants had been taught and knew to be morally right - then the process of discursive formation might explain how such a commitment comes about.

**Facebook as a discursive formation**

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002) Foucault attests that knowledge does not exist in and of itself. Instead fields of knowledge, like psychiatry, medicine and politics, provide an architecture from which ideas and practices develop. These fields have their own ‘rules of formation and continuance’ (Szczelkun, 2010). It is from these disciplines that knowledge emerges. If we consider Facebook, the designers create an architecture in which the user is immersed; it is an instant discursive formation. Foucault outlines three criteria necessary for a discursive formation.

First, is the ‘surfaces of emergence’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 45), which are the social and cultural areas through which discourse appears. In the case of Facebook, this discursive formation emerges through the internet, but is consolidated by the powerful forces of marketing and media. Not only do the marketing forces of Facebook position young people to be part of the discourse, but the media often presume a close relationship when they use terms like ‘Facebook generation’ and the ‘digital natives’. At one point during the class discussion, Nadia announced ‘My Space is so grade 6’, as if there was only one possible choice for social networking now - Facebook.

Second, Foucault (2002) describes the need for ‘authorities of delimitation’ (p. 46), which are institutions with knowledge and authority on the discursive formation. The creators ‘delimited, designated, named and established’ (p. 46) Facebook producing a particular set of conventions or discursive practices which users adopt to navigate their way round the site.
Finally, a discourse requires ‘grids of specification’, which correspond with a system by which different objects can be related to each other within the discourse. Foucault related this to madness and the psychiatric discourse, but in the following quote, if these two terms are interchanged with ‘behaviour’ and ‘Facebook’ the analogy is striking: ‘these are the systems according to which different “kinds of madness [behaviour]” are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of psychiatric [Facebook] discourse’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 46). On Facebook behaviours and interactions are mediated and communicated in particular ways. In this way, phrases like ‘In a relationship’ and ‘Interested in... women’ become common practise for human behaviour, and admiration or praise is as simple as hitting a ‘like’ button. For the participants it seemed that particular behaviours were favoured over others, as most participants mentioned that there was pressure to be extroverted. This was exemplified by Nadia who thinks ‘there is really no point in having it [Facebook]’ if you are really shy and introverted. So even though behaviours are designated and labelled through status and relationship updates, some of these behaviours are privileged over others. Each of the participants spoke of various pressures that emanate from the site itself, and while they may have been aware of them none of the participants spoke of actively resisting them.

If we consider Facebook closely, from the opening pages the identity of the user and their communication with others is mediated and constructed by the creators of the website. First, users must choose a profile picture that is essentially their online visual representation. Each time you comment on another person’s status, likes/dislikes, photo or message, your profile photo pops up alongside your comment. Your photo must be chosen very carefully, as it comes to represent who you are in the most obvious fashion. Turkle (2011) sees these profile photos as an avatar of sorts that becomes ‘a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be’ (p. 180). Reflecting upon her first profile picture, Sally confides that it was ‘so bad’ because ‘it was like of a starfish or something...because I had no idea what to do’. She seemed embarrassed for being so naïve about how to present herself on Facebook, even though she was only twelve years old. In your user profile when describing your relationship status you have the following to choose from: ‘Single’; ‘In a Relationship’; ‘Engaged’; ‘Married’; ‘It’s Complicated’; ‘In an Open Relationship’ or
‘Widowed’ (Facebook, 2011). Complex human relationships are simplified to a few words that are stated clearly on your profile page. In this way, certain aspects of your life (how you look, who you’re with) are prioritised as the most important information to your identity. Facebook also plays a role in mediating communication between users. To communicate with someone you can: ‘Poke them’; ‘Write on their wall’; or ‘Send them a message’ (Facebook, 2011).

Essentially, the site needs to be set up in such a way – it is the very nature of the internet to simplify for reasons of speed and capacity. However, what happens when your identity is presented through an over-simplified medium that privileges certain behaviours and identities over others? For example, Felicity is quite incisive when she says that her photos ‘don’t help project any idea of who I am’, however, she believes that they are ‘very important’ because people will only add you ‘if you look good’. Perhaps if you were a critical user you may be able to see it for what it is - a tool to help ‘connect and share with the people in your life’ (Facebook, 2011). But what my research shows is that for the majority of the participants in this study it is not a tool, but a discursive formation that socially shapes the young user. Facebook encourages its users to ‘stretch’ themselves; they become slightly uncomfortable with the more extroverted and narcissistic version of themselves they have presented, so need to keep returning to the site for reassurance from their ‘friends’. Essentially, they are positioned to become reliant on the site, culminating in promotion and greater use of the Facebook brand. As Foucault wrote, ‘The power effect of discourse is to position the subject in relation to structures of domination in such a way that those structures may then act upon him or her’ (Foucault, 2002). In essence, discursive formation can dissolve a strong and consistent sense of one’s self, as you act according to the architecture created for you by Facebook.

Professor of Anthropology Barry Miller believes that the ‘origins’ of Facebook might be with the young, ‘but the elderly are its future’ (Harding, 2011, p. 18). His supposition is based on the fact that Facebook enables people to stay involved in people’s lives without face-to-face contact, and face-to-face, he assumes, is what young people prefer. But what he does not acknowledge is that face-to-face is no longer a preferred method of communication for all young people. Miller fails to see the power of this discursive formation. Phillipa, Felicity and, at times, Nadia preferred
online communication and this reasonably new trend could be attributed to social networking sites, like Facebook. In this instance technology is directing behaviour. While this might not necessarily be a bad thing, for the uncritical user - who adopts the behaviour that the site directs without question - it could be. Unless using the medium critically, social networking sites, like Facebook, provide the answer to Branaman’s question: ‘how am I supposed to be?’

Foucault asks that we question discursive formations and the ability they have to restructure our reality without our knowing it. In the current study, this was exemplified when discussing the difference between online and offline behaviour. All the participants admitted that an online friend is different to an offline friend and they cited different reasons for this. Felicity feels she has a ‘better bond’ with people online, while Cassie believes that her friends try to sound ‘more mature’ on Facebook. However, while there was an acknowledgement of how the medium might affect the nature of a friendship, none of the participants admitted that they themselves changed. Despite this, most of the participants gave examples in response to other questions that showed that they do in fact express a different version of their identity online. Perhaps asking for such self-reflection is too much of a challenge for adolescents of this age. According to the participants in this study their identity was the same in an online and offline environment. Essentially, it was very difficult for them to see that Facebook shaped their reality in a particular way; they were too immersed in the discourse. If you are not aware that you change your identity on Facebook, then it is going to very difficult to become aware of how different and more complex aspects of your personality might be played out online. In short, it will make it difficult to critically engage with such a discourse.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study has presented and examined young people’s critical engagement with social networking sites. Through that examination it became obvious to me that there were factors that were beyond the control of the participants that actually conspired against their capacity to critically engage. Three main factors were identified: their age; the lack of space and time for critical reflection given the need to be highly reflexive in the presentation of self; and the fact that Facebook is a discursive formation that encourages users to engage with the site in a particular way.

Participants were aware of what critical engagement meant, but in the main it was largely unpractised. To be specific, four of the six participants were able to adjust privacy settings and were mindful not to upload personal information online. In addition, most participants were able to view photos and friendships on Facebook critically, but here such criticism is directed at ‘friends’ rather than the way the site is structured, and is often contradicted later. For example, during their interview participants often stated that ‘some people’ felt pressure to have lots of friends, but that they were able to resist such pressure. However, later they would outline scenarios where they had added strangers or people they only knew through mutual friends. Furthermore, none of the participants were able to see the difference between their online and offline identity, even though several admitted they can be more mean or extroverted online.

Four main points can be concluded from this research. First, Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium is diminished on social networking sites; instead participants feel the need to be highly reflexive in the presentation of their identity, leaving fewer opportunities to explore ideas that are not already reflected in their peer group. Being caught in a perpetual feedback loop that is both immersive and highly visual – a room of mirrors - makes it difficult for young people to gain the psychological ‘distance’ they need to critically examine such a medium. Second, while participants know the cybersafety message and can articulate what is considered moral behaviour on social networking sites, such behaviour was often not practised. The current study concludes that the drive to present a particular identity – one that was extroverted, glamorous, popular and highly sociable – caused participants to engage in behaviour they might otherwise
think of as inappropriate or questionable. Third, the participants that spoke with parents and siblings about Facebook and the cybersafety classes they had at school, seemed to have a more consistent, considered and critical approach to social networking sites. Fourth, given the sometimes ‘unthinking’ commitment to Facebook that was reported by participants, this study concludes that Facebook is a discursive formation, where participants assume, rather than question, the reality that is created through the social networking site.

One of the virtues of social networking sites as discussed in Chapter 2, is the ability to experiment with who you are and what you believe in via the ‘avatar’ that is created through your personal profile. Such experimentation, be it online or offline, is an important process of identity formation as adolescents come to an understanding about who they are and what they want to be. To Erikson (1971), this process should take place in a largely consequence free environment. However, for the young people in the current study social networking sites were certainly not a consequence free environment. Most reported that photos were extremely important, to the point where several participants interpreted the term ‘inappropriate photo’ as meaning a bad or ugly photo of themselves. While they felt compelled to post photos of themselves on Facebook, they knew that they would be judged by them, which led to anxiety for several participants. Status updates were treated in much the same way, with some participants reporting that they do not post status updates because they are too worried what people will think. Participants report that there is a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way to do things on Facebook and there are social and psychological consequences if you get it wrong.

Using Facebook is akin to being in a room of mirrors; you present an identity to the world, but also adjust to and build on the reflections that are bounced back to you from others. In this way, experimenting with an identity on Facebook will always cause comment and consequence, particularly if it does not fit in with the expectations of your peer group. It could be argued that such behaviour happens in the real world, however, there are several points that make such behaviour more significant on Facebook. First, a couple of the participants gave the impression that it was difficult to see a way out of Facebook; they felt compelled to use the site even though it made them feel depressed or anxious. Given the ‘march’ of the digital world into every
minute of our daily lives it will be near impossible to ‘switch off’. This brings to mind the title of Sherry Turkle’s book ‘Always On/ Always On You: The Tethered Self’ (Turkle, 2006), where she conjures our inability to escape technology. Judging the number of smart phones that I have confiscated in class, many of the participants in this study are already ‘always on’. Second, the feedback loop becomes much shorter and quicker on Facebook. There is little time to develop a sense of self before you feel compelled to present it to the world via Facebook as a statement about who you are. Young people may still have a choice as to when and how they use Facebook, but this study found that most of the participants felt it was a central, if not indispensable, tool in negotiating their social life. When one student, who was not on Facebook, was asked when she might ‘get’ Facebook, she replied ‘When I am older and I need to talk to somebody’. She said the statement with sadness, as if face-to-face communication might become a thing of the past and she would have to become a Facebook user if she wanted to communicate with her peers.

Further to this, all posts and photos on Facebook are written in virtual ink, leaving each user with a ‘digital fingerprint’ that will not just go away. What happens on Facebook, does not just stay on Facebook. Only Nina mentioned this as something she thought about when using the site. As the triangulated subject - annexed between the online and offline identities that they have created - young people may be able to retreat into the socially networked world, but would they want to? And more importantly can they escape it? Being some twenty years older than the participants I am able to see how things from the past have a habit of catching up with you. My more mature perspective no doubt influences my reading of their behaviour, however, I can remember a time when imagining yourself as an adult was nigh on impossible.

What participants said they were doing on Facebook and what they actually practised online were two different things. For example, in the interviews most reported that photos can be an inaccurate representation of people’s identity and that an online friend is different to an offline friend. However, these sentiments were often contradicted later in interview or by the online behaviour that they recounted. The majority of the participants knew what they should and should not be doing on Facebook: you should not judge photos as an accurate representation of people’s identity; you should not judge others online; you should not become friends with
strangers; you should ‘know’ all your Facebook ‘friends’; you should be the same person online as you are offline. In essence, this was the cybersafety message. However, this message often contradicted behaviours like having lots of ‘pretty, cool’ friends and posting glamorous, often provocative photos; essentially what participants admitted gave you ‘status’ on Facebook. In Bourdieu’s terms these things amount to cultural capital in this field. As a result, what the participants said and what they actually did were two different things. They may well have been aware of the social, physical and psychological pressures that resulted from using Facebook, however, being actively able to resist these pressures was very difficult for the participants. In this way, very little critical engagement was taking place.

Sally was quite open and frank in her follow up interview. She wanted me to know that the majority of her friends post provocative photos (even when they say otherwise) and that there is a lot of bullying on Facebook. Her tone was conspiratorial, as if she knew it was wrong to openly criticise. However, in her mind there was a certain moral code that should be followed on Facebook, which, according to her, the majority of her friends contradicted. Part of her assurance stemmed from her older sister, who talked to her about Facebook. Similarly, Nina, had a long conversation with her parents before she was allowed to open an account on Facebook. Despite having low privacy settings, when I spoke with her she seemed clear about what was appropriate behaviour on Facebook, and intimated an understanding of the particular reality that is created by such a social networking site.

This can be contrasted with Nadia, who scoffed when asked if she spoke to her parents about Facebook, but was quite naïve about her use of the site. For example, she sees no difference between the way people behave online and in the real world; if they post it online they will also say it to your face. In addition, neither Cassie nor Felicity spoke to parents or siblings about Facebook. Based on these findings, and in the context of this study, it is my belief that appropriate and critical social networking use is strengthened by conversations that sit outside the educational milieu. Conversations with parents, older family members or friends help to build on the sentiments outlined in cybersafety classes and essentially turn theory into practise. This raises the point that while the educational discourse on cyberbullying is important, discussion and confirmation from parents and others adds an extra layer of
confidence. Through such discussions, critical and appropriate social networking behaviour become the right choice from an educational, as well as a social or cultural perspective.

From participants’ accounts it seems appropriate to conceive of Facebook as a discursive formation. It has creators who are responsible for the structure and layout of the site, who scaffold new online practices that have caused us to see and experience our social relationships in new ways. Furthermore new words and phrases have entered our lexicon as a result of the Facebook experience. Take the word ‘friend’ for example. On Facebook being someone’s ‘friend’ might make you one of 900 names listed on their profile, but whether you speak to them in real life is another matter altogether. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it is inaccurate to use the noun ‘friend’, which has connotations of affection and familiarity. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new discourse where we ‘friend’ and ‘unfriend’ our way through social relations. In short, Facebook is a discursive formation, which recasts the notion of our relationships with others. However, given that the site is based around uploading photos and posts, a certain self confidence is necessary to use the site. Personalities that are outgoing and extroverted are, therefore, more suited to such a medium as all the participants and class members noted. In this way, there is a subconscious push for users to become a particular type of person; one that is outgoing and fun. All the participants suggested they felt there was pressure to be more extroverted on Facebook, but again most would suggest that other users felt the pressure and not themselves. Talking about how ‘other’ people use and experience Facebook might in fact give a more truthful insight into the actual behaviours that take place.

One of Foucault’s (2002) concerns was our reluctance to question the way a discursive formation shapes our perception of the world. He believed that we should interrogate why discursive formations result in some statements and practices emerging into our everyday lives and not others. Considering what the participants in the current study reported, Facebook is a discursive formation; through both subtle and overt means, it encourages an identity that is extroverted, outgoing and even narcissistic. The pursuit of such an identity made it difficult for the participants to critically engage with the site, as they become immersed in the social reality of
Facebook. Rather than seeing how Facebook shaped their perception of their own and others’ identities they were consumed by achieving the ‘ideal’ self set out in their personal profile and pursuing what was considered valuable in this particular field – lots of friends and a rich and exciting social life.

**Facebook and the typical teenager: a match made in heaven?**

The participants in this study exhibit typical teenage behaviours: they are concerned with appearance; they want to be part of a group and they are; at times, awkwardly self conscious. While this is a natural part of the maturation process such traits can be used by sites like Facebook to further the influence and power of the social networking site. Whether this is a conscious drive by the creators is unknown. What is known is that Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, does want to change the way we communicate with the expansion of the social networking site into a web wide platform that connects us with friends and businesses. Paranoia over such theory becomes reasonable when newspapers last year reported a leaked conversation between Zuckerberg and a friend in which he called Facebook users ‘dumb f***s’, because they trusted him with pages of their personal information (Hutcheon, 2010). This personal information can then be sold onto companies. In this instance, Zuckerberg assumes that the user is passive and can now be acted upon by the power of economics and politics.

Foucault describes discourses as a ‘criteria of transformation or of threshold’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 54) in which the subject is fragmented through a ‘complex relationship of successive displacements’(p. 55). Once dispersed in this way a subject ‘performs’ according to the stricture of the discourse and the spaces in which they find themselves, whether they be virtual or real. Based on the findings of this study it is my belief that Facebook is a discourse that operates in much the same way. If such a situation exists it becomes essential for young people to critically engage with Facebook, particularly when its dominance is considered. Currently, Facebook is listed as having 800 million users (Facebook, 2011). Such control of the market - the next biggest social network Twitter has 200 million users(ebizMBA, 2011) - means that Facebook’s version of online communications is powerfully seductive.
The highly visual and reflexive nature of the medium, as well as the dominance of Facebook in both the social and capital realms of life conspire against a young person’s ability to see how this medium shapes their perception of themselves, the world around them and their relationships with others. Facebook can become dangerous in the hands of an unwitting teenage user. They can become immersed in the social networking reality to such an extent that they lose any objective sense of themselves; they become caught in a vertiginous spiral where there is little room for critical reflection.

My research suggests that schools should be encouraged to play a more significant role in educating for critical use of social networking sites. By coupling pertinent information with opportunities for young people to reflect on their use of social networking sites, schools could encourage students to see how such a medium is shaping their view of the world. If, as educators, our goal is to encourage confident, enquiring agents in the world, then not only does more discussion and education around the digital literacy of social networking sites need to take place, but we also need to continue to investigate and attempt to understand the complex and dynamic nature of the digital worlds young people inhabit.
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