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**IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND THE  
PROBLEMATIC SELF ONLINE:  
FACEBOOK, FRIENDSHIP AND RECOGNITION**

**Student Name: Kayleigh Louise Layla Flaxman**

**Student Number: 08907009**

**Programme: PhD Sociology**

**Supervisors: Dr. Vincent A. Miller and Professor Frank Furedi**

**School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research**

**University of Kent**

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*To mum, happy retirement!*

# ABSTRACT

This thesis broadly addresses the issue of identity management and performance online. The social networking site Facebook has been used as the primary research site due to its dominance on the World Wide Web and in individuals' lives. Specifically this thesis seeks to understand how people negotiate their identity in a social space where a multitude of different friendship groups and associations are simultaneously present. The thesis makes extensive use of the premise originally made by Erving Goffman, that we give particular performances of self to particular groups of people and social situations, and extends this to our more intimate and interpersonal relationships. Further, an exploration is undertaken of the relevancy of early Internet theories concerning the fragmented self, and hypothesises that although these arguments are not redundant the opposite of this is equally plausible. This is to say that instead of identities becoming segregated, the design and conditions of Facebook allows its users to present what is termed here as a re-centred self: a self or identity that is an amalgamation of all relevant identities in order to satisfy a level of recognition in as many social groups and associations as possible.

Through an extensive observational online ethnography and a number of online interviews, the data revealed a complex relationship between the individual, their presentation of self, their relations with others and offline community integration. Using three case studies (Goth, eating disorders and fetishism) it emerged that depending on the perceived taboo or deviant nature of the specific identity, the expected reactions of others and the integration of the identity in the offline individuals engage with highly variant forms of identity management. Using these different forms of management, that include the fragmented self, the re-centred self and combinations of multiple strategies, individuals negotiate their way through a myriad of identities and audiences. Through successful identity management individuals aim to be able to protect themselves against potential repercussions from revelation of a problematic identity, and in turn maintain a comfortable level of recognition.

# INTRODUCTION

It is argued that contemporary societies in the West pose a series of unprecedented questions for the individuals who live in them, many of which surround the notion of belonging and identity. Traditional outlets such as religion, local community, family, and even friends are seen by many as no longer capable of supplying answers and satisfying the needs of the modern individual. Indeed, the emergence of sociology itself could be attributed to fierce concerns about the erosion of tradition and the consequences for society, community and identity (the founding fathers of sociology Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were each apprehensive about modern social life). Identity in and of itself was however not given a great deal of attention, and was not the focus of concern within sociology, until the 1950s, with the notion of a crisis of identity becoming more pertinent in the 1960s (Gleason, 1983, p.910, 913). The rise of new information and communication technologies have refuelled the debates surrounding identity and its meaning, and the consequences of modern life on an individual's sense of self, and further for their sense of 'belonging' to a community (which in turn exacerbates effects on their sense of self).

The Internet and the mobile phone specifically have been widely criticised for encouraging and reinforcing the erosion of 'real life' and for providing a poor substitute for meaningful face-to-face contact, which it is said is becoming increasingly rare (see Robins and Webster, 1999 or Bauman, 2000). Even early optimist Professor Sherry Turkle has famously performed a something of a U-turn on her original consideration of the potential of the World Wide Web, focusing more recently on its negative impact (Young, 2011, also see Turkle, 2011). Turkle (1995), from both a sociological and psychological background, saw great potential in the Internet to expand our sociality, our intellect, and experience of the world arguing: "Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual. We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity." (Turkle, 1995, p.26). Sixteen years later Turkle had reconsidered, asserting that: "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the

demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.” (Turkle, 2011, p.1).

In developed countries, young people and generations take for granted the pervasive nature of the Internet in their lives, and having an online or virtual presence is not only expected but also accepted as part of everyday life. Generation Y’s experience of a life of constant screens is well documented in the education and learning fields of academia, and now their children (so called new generation digital natives) immersed from birth with high technology and seemingly embracing new manifestations with ease (for example, Weiler, 2004, Gardner and Eng, 2005, Palfry and Gasser, 2008) . Alongside this rather blasé acquiescence comes little reservation towards exposing details of their lives and their selves online, most distinctly on social networking sites (SNSs) that are designed to display personal information (Barnes, 2006). Indeed SNSs, such as Facebook, are one of the most popular online communication platforms, and actively encourage their members to upload as much detail as possible about their selves on a profile page which is focused on the individual, and subsequently their connections, collectively referred to as ‘friends’. This includes not only personal and cultural tastes (music, food, books, films, and more or less anything else), but also current address, age, birthday, school, work that identify where the individual is as well as who they are. On Facebook there is even a ‘places’ feature where individuals may tag themselves, and others, at particular locations that are linked to a page with a map of exactly where that place is as well as details about the area or establishment (a smaller version of the map will also appear on the individual’s profile via the Timeline). Inadequate knowledge or implementation of security settings can mean that the content of these pages, which almost universally includes a collection of personal photographs as well as the above, becomes accessible to anyone with Internet access.

There is subsequently a persistent fear concerning young people, their use of the Internet and their direct safety, primarily against sexual predators (Livingstone et al, 2005 and Suler, 2004). There are also concerns, from the public, media and academics alike, with the rather more indirect consequences of having such a wealth of information about an individual existing in cyberspace for an indefinite amount of time, particularly when it comes to employment opportunities and romantic relationships (Davis, 2007, Musie, 2009 and

Elphinston and Noller, 2011). Specific concern with Facebook also arises from its sheer pervasiveness in individuals' lives. Questions are raised as to its effect on our friendships and relationships, our community integration and our ability to maintain and manage a sense of self and identity (see Nussbaum, 2007 and Boyd, 2006).

A vast number of those outside of the category of 'youth' or young people are also utilising the Internet in prolific fashion as a staple part of their everyday private and social lives, exacerbating and extending the above concerns to society-wide levels. During 2009 in the earlier part of this research, the percentage of thirty-fives and over on Facebook rose from 18.9% on 04 January 2009, to 36.3% just six months later on 04 July 2009 (Corbett, 2009). By the end of 2012 this percentage had increased further to a phenomenal 66% of Facebook users, with the largest age cohort being 45-54 year olds at 30% (JobStock, 2012). Yet, this is not as remarkable as it may seem as at the same point in time Twitter, Facebook's closest rival, also had a user base comprising 54% of over thirty-fives, although its largest cohort is 25-34 year olds at 24% (JobStock, 2012). The data for the total number of Facebook users suggest that the percentage increase of over thirty fives is not due to younger individuals leaving the site for alternatives, and is rather due to a genuine increase in over thirty fives joining the site. On 15 September 2009, Facebook celebrated reaching a milestone of 300 million users and Mark Zuckerberg the founder of the site stated in his blog "we're just getting started on our goal of connecting everyone". More recently on the 28 July 2013 the number of Facebook users stood at 1.15 billion, which in itself is a twenty-one per cent increase from 2012 (Zuckerberg, 2009 and Facebook, 2013).

These figures provide evidence that Facebook is more than an artefact of youth culture, and its influence extends to the population as a whole. Further indication of the prolific nature of Facebook and evidence of its movement into the everyday life is illustrated by its position as the second most popular website in the world, below Google as of April 2013 (TechSmasher, 2013). This is in comparison to 2009 where Facebook was the fourth most visited website, below Google, Microsoft and Yahoo (TechCrunch, 2009), suggesting that despite some scepticism Facebook remains resilient against a variety of competitors, and indeed is an ever important feature of individual's Internet activity and presence. The most recent figure on the number of

individuals with Internet access is 2.41 billion (34.3% of the total world population), of which it is estimated that 43% use Facebook (in line with the above figure of 1.15 billion Facebook users) (InternetWorldStats, 2012 and TechSmasher, 2013). It is a certainty that not all of the profiles on Facebook are active and nor will each profile belong to a unique user, the number of active individuals is likely to be somewhat lower than the 1.15 billion mark<sup>1</sup>, however with 699 million unique daily logins (a 27% increase from the previous year) there is no denying Facebook's continuing popularity (Facebook, 2013).

This thesis does not seek to make a judgement about the overall positive or negative effects of Facebook and its increasing immersion into and necessity in our everyday lives as an isolated entity. It is the opinion here that the Internet, the online, and specifically SNSs, are little different to other communication technologies that have become a popular and pervasive part of life (such as radio, television, telephones and so on). As Christine Hine states:

In the early years of the Internet... [e]xtreme utopian and dystopian visions sought to extrapolate social consequences from qualities of the technology. As the Internet became mainstream, however, and as our experience of it as an embedded aspect of everyday life has deepened, it has become harder to sustain such sweeping generalizations (Hine, 2010, p. 719).

Arguments surrounding Facebook and other SNSs follow similar patterns to that which have come before it, initially with two seemingly dichotomous opinions; the optimists, in awe of the potential the new technology may bring, and then, the pessimists, fuelled by a fear of the unknown and change, and a public obsession with a new and curious thing. In time the optimists quieten and almost disappear, as in Turkle's case, as the technology becomes normalised the potential for good very often does not come to fruition, at least not to the extent envisioned. The pessimists however, tend to be justified through the media to a certain extent. For

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<sup>1</sup> As of June 2012, Facebook estimated that of their 'Monthly Active Users' 4.8% of profiles were duplicate accounts which are those "...that a user maintains in addition to his or her principal account...", 2.4% were user misclassified where individuals "...created personal profiles for a business, organization, or non-human entity such as a pet..." rather than the permitted Facebook 'page' and finally 1.5% were undesirable "which represent user profiles that we determine are intended to be used for purposes that violate our terms of service" (in most cases what would be classified as 'fake profiles') (Facebook, 2012, p.24). In total, this accounts for 8.7% of Facebook memberships, reducing membership to just less than 1.05 billion.

every positive report there are many more concerning the negative impacts: paedophilia, employment (the loss of), general societal breakdown and more recently terrorism.

However, the tone of media reports has changed from the technology itself being the source of the problem, to either the individual or the government receiving the blame. With the normalisation of a technology, a more sophisticated use of it is expected, and if a person has failed to, for example, make use of appropriate privacy settings then more fool them. The technology becomes a necessary evil, people learn to adapt to it, and for the most part have an adequate amount of knowledge (which includes knowing what products to buy, because fear and aggravation can always be capitalised upon) to minimise its negative impact. Examples of such adaptation and precaution might be the development of ex-directory options for landline phones or parental Internet control. This is of course a generalisation, there are subtle nuances between the different technologies that will create different concerns and problems, and such transitions typically take decades to achieve. However the formation of the arguments surrounding how good or bad the Internet is, and Facebook within it, are not new and will run their predictable course, unlikely to have substantial effects on prevalence or use of the technology itself.

Instead then, this thesis seeks to understand the social processes of identity management in an online environment, and in conjunction, what relationship this has with identity, sense of self, recognition, and belonging for the individual in their life as a whole. The point of interest here is, how people have adapted to and integrated Facebook into their lives, rather than whether Facebook has positive or negative effects. As Boellestorf (2008) did for his examination of Second Life, the research here takes the emergence of Facebook as a given and does not question whether its emergence is a 'good' or 'bad' thing. It is acknowledged that even though Facebook itself may not survive indefinitely, it will almost certainly be replaced by other sites with similar properties, intents and purposes given the reliance individuals and corporations have on this type of social medium. As such, as with all other social phenomena, we must seek to understand what individuals are doing on Facebook, how and why they are doing so and the consequences of their choices to not only understand a significant feature of the online, but everyday life generally. To emphasise the point further, this research should not strictly be thought of as a study of the

online, but rather a study of everyday identity management from an online perspective. Of course, the research could be said to be limited in not capturing first hand offline identity management techniques, however a vast amount of literature already exists in this area which forms the theoretical basis for the thesis. Researching from a starting point of the online is liable to give an alternative perspective from which to ascertain answers to the bigger questions concerning self and belonging in modern, Western, life. The online and the offline are no longer separate entities; they are now combined, for better or worse, and together simply construct what is known as everyday life.

Identity as a theoretical and empirical point of interest is prolific in sociology, and as part of this how we gain a sense of self and a sense of belonging are frequently considered. The Internet has certainly aided in a continued interest in such areas. Early Internet theorists were simultaneously excited and concerned with the ease with which one could choose to be 'someone else' online, and whether this would allow us freedom to explore our self and selves without constraint, or whether it would disconnect us from reality. Given the tendency for individuals to represent versions of self that are somewhat akin to their offline selves and a greater emphasis on the visual, the nature of questions surrounding identity have changed somewhat. There is however a fundamental element of identity maintenance that is not so well rehearsed in sociological literature, that being the concept of recognition, which aids in making sense of the actions of individuals when it comes to identity management. Recognition from others of 'who' the individual is, and in turn the individual's own recognition of themselves, provides us with a considerable amount of self-esteem, but also provides us with confirmation of our 'self' and a psychological base with which to ground ourselves and avoid anxious and depressive episodes. Sociologically, it is argued here that recognition is important for providing a source of ontological security, providing a stable understanding of oneself and those whom are meaningful to us. Reliable sources of ontological security are considered to be weakening and in some cases disappearing, due to the changeable nature of the modern world (see Giddens, 1990, 1991), the provision of recognition offers the individual a continued grasp of who they are and where they belong despite any alterations occurring around them.

Honneth (1995) argues that recognition is a vital and fundamental human need. Relationships involving mutual recognition are a precondition for self-realization; that is we cannot have a sense of our self and our identity without being recognised by others whom we recognise ourselves. There are, according to Honneth, three ways in contemporary society in which an individual must be recognised in order to form a complete identity: love, rights and solidarity. Of concern to this thesis is solidarity, which is essentially self-esteem, involving the recognition of each individual as an individual, and an acknowledgement of each individual's unique contribution to society (with particular focus on the former). Honneth stipulates that in a 'good' society, no one should be denied self-esteem, an idea which has been developed considerably in modern Western societies, particularly in the USA. Such an idea may be seen in sports matches most often (although not exclusively) played by young children where scores are not kept and both teams are considered winners. However, as Taylor (1992) argues, this assumption is where the problem of recognition in contemporary society begins. True recognition of an individual's worth comes from the study and experience of their behaviour - to be recognised by right, through the fact of existing, is patronising and condescending (Taylor, 1992). Claims for recognition are left unfulfilled, and a perpetual and insatiable demand to be recognised is created (Taylor, 1992). Modern society then has produced not the claim for recognition itself, but the conditions in which it is more likely to fail. The more that attempts to be recognised fail the more prolific and outlandish the attempts to be recognised will become, which is again potentially detrimental to gain recognition, as they are unlikely to be a very positive or indeed very accurate representation of the individual (or indeed collective).

Aside from family (and in some cases more so), our friends will have an in-depth experience of our behaviour, or at least particular elements of our behaviour that contribute to the whole. Yet Honneth rarely considers them as part of an individual's target audience when it comes to self-esteem, instead designating them to the category of 'love' which involves an individual's physical and emotional needs being met. Yet there is very little that can annihilate an individual's feeling of self-worth and knowledge of who they are like the dissolution of a close relationship, be that a family member, a lover, or a friend. Friendship is not as an explicit part of the data as identity and recognition, however it is often a running tie between the two in

conjunction with group or community membership. Individuals with more stable and intimate interpersonal relationships with others tend to make less claims for recognition on Facebook, and when they are made they are more likely to be fulfilled; those who an individual is closest to also seem to have the most lasting impact on self-esteem and recognition fulfilment. However friendship needs to be considered in context, the label 'friend' increasingly covers a wide spectrum of associations of varying levels of closeness, some of which may barely be meaningful and others that could be considered irreplaceable.

Social networking sites are based on 'adding' individuals as friends and building a large network of people who may or may not be known in real life (Boyd, 2006). The decision to request friendship or to accept a request from another is, if the individual is previously unknown, based on an individual's profile; a database of text of given attributes, as opposed to a narrative of the behaviour of the individual (Wittel, 2001 and Turkle, 1996). Arguably then social networking sites produce an environment where claims for recognition are likely to fail, and evidence for the perpetual need for recognition this produces may be seen in the extremely high number of 'friends' that often appear on individuals' profiles and the process of serial 'adding'. If existing friends do not fulfil the need for recognition, one solution is to add more who might. Friendship and the process of 'friending' (adding friends) in this sense are inextricably linked to recognition on social networking sites. However on Facebook there is an onus on adding people who are already known, evidenced by the previous tagline 'Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life' and the current 'Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook', both of which set the tone for having pre-existing associations as contacts. In turn those who appear on individual's profiles are more likely to be friends with some meaning attached to them, and have at least at a point in the past if not more immediately, given us recognition and fed our self-esteem. Where individuals are known in both offline and online spheres, the events, interactions and claims to be recognised that occur in each are likely to impact on their counterpart given that the same individuals are present in each realm. An argument online is likely to affect offline relationships, which is in turn likely to feed back into online activity, and vice versa; as stated above it is the argument of this thesis that the online and the offline can very often not be separated. Claims for recognition on Facebook are more likely to succeed where the individuals know each other offline,

compared to cases where an offline relationship does not exist, due to having direct experience of each other's behaviour and actions, and for the potential of higher levels of mutual respect existing as a result of this.

However, having a friendship does not mean it is a necessarily useful tool for forming, and also maintaining, a sense of self, the type of friendship (including the strength of the tie), the geographical, temporal and social space the friendships are based and the interactions which occur between the individuals involved have significant effects. Furthermore, with the label of friendship comes a series of obligations and expectations that must be upheld to a satisfactory level by each side in order for the relationship to be sustained. In the event of being friends individuals are also making the statement that they value and respect each other as individuals and accept the selves they present to each other as 'true' or 'real'. Recognition then becomes an implicit obligation of friendship, and following the argument above the closer we feel we are to an individual the more we value them as an individual, therefore, the closer the friendship and the more meaningful the recognition. At this point it may be questioned as to how meaningful recognition can be if it is expected to occur by both parties involved, and indeed as Honneth identified through recognition as love, family and friends have an obligation to fulfil us emotionally. However, insincere projections of recognition cannot be maintained indefinitely, if nothing else doing so is likely to be mentally exhausting. If geographical constraints are not the cause for dissolution of a relationship, which is indeed less likely with the onset of Facebook, then temporal factors (moving on, growing up, leading different lives and so on) may be involved. Where individuals begin to take different life paths and as a result what they value and respect changes in ways that are incompatible with each other, then no matter what emotional attachment is held, their value and respect for each other will also begin to deplete. Although recognition is an expectation within friendship, if it is not 'real', then it and ultimately the relationship will eventually dissolve.

Given that recognition is not an unconditional feature of friendship, having real life friends on Facebook is then no guarantee of recognition being given and/or maintained. Indeed there are several scenarios in which Facebook activity can actively contribute towards a break down in recognition and consequently a relationship. Facebook is an excellent source for passing on gossip and making that which might otherwise

be shared in time between close friends instantly accessible to a wide audience. Facebook can be considered a type of modern day confessional, except instead of to a single priest sworn to secrecy your guilt and immoral behaviour is pronounced to the entire congregation, and importantly it is not necessarily done so by you or with your consent. Not keeping a secret or more accurately 'over confessing' can have considerable social impact for a person as a whole, and not just for specific relationships.

Where trust is broken through a misplaced post on Facebook, it will always have a direct effect on recognition, the question of 'how could someone I thought I knew do this?' tends to have only one logical answer, that you did not in fact know them. The respect given to them as a person that can be trusted would be erased, and trust in itself is a significant factor in any close relationship. Indeed without mutual and balanced trust on both sides arguably a relationship cannot continue indefinitely at any rate (an idea considered with Giddens' work on the transformation of intimacy). Furthermore, the guilty individual will, perhaps only temporarily, lose their status as an individual by being someone unknown and not trusted, that is someone who cannot be and is not deserving of recognition. As a result, Facebook may contribute to relationship dissolution as it allows for more instances of public chastising and arguments, and for romantic relationships issues concerning previous partners and jealousy potentially exacerbate the situation. Recognition has to be mutual to be meaningful, whilst an apology may restore friendship and recognition; this will only be done through a process of negotiation, and does not often resolve a problem in its entirety. For each event that requires an apology, the relationship is weakened until mutual recognition can no longer be sustained as all respect has been lost.

For example, it is becoming an increasingly more common experience to have watched someone else's friendship or romantic relationship disintegrate in front of one's eyes through status rants and wall arguments. Again, like the population of Facebook membership itself, this is not an activity only confined to the younger generation, although it is perhaps more prolific within that category. Adults too however will grace their friends with the details of their messy break up, eliciting a frenzied attack in the defence of each partner on either side that typically ends in nothing but profanities being hurled across the metaphorical Facebook fence. Daniel Miller (2011) gives a detailed account of such an instance to the extent that one of his participants

blames Facebook for his marital breakdown. It is all too easy, especially with mobile access to Facebook, immediately after a fight and in a moment of anger, inebriation, or both, post a vengeful status against someone that is later regretted – it can always be removed but it only takes one person to see it and the damage is already done. As Miller, D (2011) states once a post has been made “[i]t is hard for it not to be remembered, even when retracted” (Miller, D., 2011, p.175).

However, it is not merely the ‘airing of dirty laundry’ that means having a series of meaningful contacts on Facebook does not necessarily lead to maintained or improved recognition, posting too much information in a more general sense can also be detrimental. Incessant, banal or inappropriate posts on Facebook are a source of frequent annoyance that most individuals can relate to (for numerous examples, see lamebook.com). This can extend to the point that another posts so much content they are removed from an individual’s newsfeed, or, removed from their profile all together through de-friending. In relationships with more emotion involved, there is likely to be an attempt to persuade the prolific poster to consider their behaviour more carefully before any harsher actions are taken. In either scenario, respect of the individual is diminished if not lost altogether and in turn so too is the potential for exchanges of recognition.

Identity, recognition and friendship are interlinked and form an almost cyclical relationship. However, within the literature on both friendship and identity, there is little acknowledgement that different groups of friends, and indeed even different individual friends when seen in isolation from others, are likely to require different presentations of the self, dependent on the history and context of the friendships. The presentation and management of the self and selves in everyday life is an inherently complicated process, and one that is influenced by an extremely varied and wide range of factors that may broadly be categorised through individual choice, unconscious psychological streams, and also social constraints and structures. Further, the contexts and people that we interact with and their reactions to us influence our sense of self, yet our sense of self will also influence our participation in particular contexts and the performances we choose to give (which relates to Giddens’ notion of reflexivity). As stated above, it is only since the 1950s that identity has become an important feature of the work of sociologists, and its inherently complicated nature combined with the fast paced changes in society have resulted in a reasonably significant amount of under theorising and

neglect in some areas. We all make choices about the self we present to others, and the reaction, in this case the recognition, positive or negative, we receive from them is then used and processed reflexively. Depending on the nature, meaning and extent of the recognition given, ends at one end with a marginally altered self, and at the other an almost 'new' self, both of which are geared towards receiving further recognition. Identity is not static, nor is it singular, whilst we need an idea of a core self to make sense of who we are in relation to the world around us, in reality our self varies over time and space.

Connections between identity, our friendships and recognition all concern the process of the presentation of the self or selves and the notion of impression management. The identity we present and gain from activity and engagement with Facebook has implications for all of these. It is agreed with Goffman (1959 and 1963) that an individual will usually attempt to keep the audiences they engage with, friendship groups included, out of 'hearing' distance in order to avoid role conflict and to avoid doubt being cast over the performances given. However this presents a further complication in regards to recognition being given or maintained on Facebook. As has been well established Facebook actively encourages the adding of those who are already known, by default individuals bring multiple audiences together into one space. Doing so can result in an enormous amount of impression management from individuals, in some cases requiring in-depth re-negotiation of self presentation in order to maintain simultaneous interaction with multiple and differing audiences and ensure that conflict between (and within) those audiences is avoided. This is the unique contributing factor Facebook as a technology and social medium makes to modern life. There are no other instances in modern life where an individual's variety of associations have been brought together and expected to coexist in a single space on a more or less permanent basis. Fleeting moments of connection are known to occur, for example at weddings and other formal occasions, but even so groups are very often separated by seating and table arrangements. With all audiences present, poor identity management on Facebook has the potential to be socially catastrophic for an individual, particularly where the presentations of self normally given to each are very noticeably distinct.

An extensive online ethnography consisting of participant observation and interviews on the social networking site Facebook has been conducted for this thesis in order to address issues of self, ascertain how individuals

are managing their identity in a virtual space that presents multiple audiences simultaneously, and identify the problems that arise from this situation. Within this, the thesis considers how individuals manage potentially problematic identity elements (or as Goffman (1963) would call them, spoiled identities) in the unusual setting of having a variety of audiences present together that would not normally be so, and that are in all likelihood accustomed to disparate performances. This is done with specific reference to notions of the fragmented and the re-centred self, two forms of identity management discussed by existing literature on online presentations of self. The former is found more widely in early Internet literature and purports that like the windows of a computer, individuals separate different parts of their identity online and bring forth the relevant identity to whichever 'window' is at the front (here a window would be equivalent to a particular audience). More recently academics have started to consider whether in fact the opposite of this occurs, meaning that in an online realm individuals are more likely to merge multiple elements of their identity and create an entirely new self – termed here the re-centred self. The re-centred self, is a self which incorporates elements of different selves and performances in real life, highlighting some elements and downplaying or all together hiding others, in order to present a self that is acceptable to all. The aim here is to collate and refine theories on the re-centred self, and to ascertain through the collected data which, if any, of these forms of management is most relevant to online identity. Indeed, this thesis argues that both are employed by individuals, often simultaneously, and that another form of identity management which falls somewhere between the two through the sophisticated use of security settings is also present.

In addition the thesis also discusses the consequences of the success or failure of implementing adequate identity management through the concept of recognition – that is the recognition of an individual as unique and 'good', and showing awareness and respect for that which makes them so. Poor identity management online can lead others to challenge their preconception of who an individual is, thereby reducing or preventing recognition being given. Conversely effective identity management online renders pre-held convictions to be reinforced, and aid in the continued receipt of recognition. However, comparisons between interviews and Facebook activity revealed a more complex relationship between identity performance, recognition and belonging that is directly linked to the integration of particular elements of identity in offline

social activities. Very simply, the more an element of self can be successfully performed in an offline environment face to face with others who share that particular identity trait, the less likely a person is to isolate that identity online (that is fully fragment it), and secondly to make perpetual calls for the identity to be recognised. Further, those who have found a place for their identity to belong in the offline are far more likely to have their calls for recognition answered, and positively so, compared to those who do not have such a sense of belonging. The exception to this is where due to certain constraints (social, health or legal) the element of self itself (as posed to being by individual basis) cannot feasibly be participated in a face to face situation with others. In these cases calls to recognition are met with positive response in an online space. However, the effect of the recognition given is far more fleeting than when recognition is possible offline, creating a perpetual situation once again.

In conclusion, it will be argued that individuals have a variety of mechanisms for managing their identity online, much of which is determined through a combination of: understanding of or willing to engage with security settings; the perceived level of deviancy or taboo carried by the identity trait; and the level of integration, belonging and face to face interaction elements of self receive. The latter of these is most analytically important as regardless of whether effective online identity management has been implemented, it has direct consequence on the likelihood of an individual having their online calls for recognition answered in a positive manner, and for the recognition given to have a lasting impact preventing perpetual calls for recognition. A cyclical relationship is then created, which will serve on the positive side to generally increase an individual's ontological security and provide them with a stable sense of self, or conversely on the negative side will deplete both of these states. In essence, a new technology cannot change the world if the world is not capable of, or willing, to change. Whilst not directly destroying our communities or our sense of self and belonging, the Internet and that which manifests on it, is of no lasting promise to the individual, unless there is stability in their offline lives. Yet where the offline fails to provide the security and interaction needed, the Internet at least proffers hope in the potential, and sometimes the actuality, of gaining these things, and that, for many is better than having nothing at all.

Suggestions for future research will include a recommendation that similar research be repeated with non-problematic elements of self, as it is recognised that having used potentially problematic identities creates some limitations to the research. As will be explained in more detail in time, it was necessary to use problematic identities opposed to non-deviant identities due to a combination of methodological and analytical challenges including access, the nature of the fragmented self, the ability to see impression management in process and the benefits of having participants that are familiar with the importance of performance regulation in their everyday experience (especially for the researcher as a novice ethnographer). It would be expected that in using non-stigmatised participants fewer cases of wholly fragmented identities would be present and re-centred selves would prevail, integrating the identity trait in question amongst others more comfortably. Similarly, there is also more likely to be a far greater number of successful integrations of identities in offline face to face environments, however, there is no reason to presume that the effects of this will change. It will be suggested that what should be investigated more closely is to what extent commitment to and the level of importance attributed to the element of self has on these relationships and their consequences, as due to their deviant nature (thus inducing a process of isolation from and rejection of 'normal' society) most participants had a high level of importance placed on the identities in question.

As a secondary but nevertheless important aim this thesis stands to give a detailed account of qualitative research in an online environment and gives consideration of both ethical and practical issues of conducting research in a virtual space. At the onset of this thesis there was a growing body of literature concerning the online, however much was theoretically based and there was a certain lack of in-depth qualitative work conducted online. There were of course exceptions, however methodological description was basic and often the design was not rigorous in comparison to offline counterparts (for example, the early work of Danah Boyd or Paul Hodkinson). Online research and methods are now accounted for in much more depth and rigour, yet for sociology the Internet is still a relatively new area of interest and potential research site and as such there is a large gap to bridge between the theory of conducting research online and the practice of doing so. Whilst this thesis by no means purports to fill this gap it is hoped that through a somewhat more detailed account and analysis of the methodology than is typical a contribution can be made at least towards a better

understanding in this area. Furthermore given the rapid change so associated with the Internet and online platforms it is of vital importance that methodological considerations are kept as up to date as possible as much as analytical and theoretical considerations are.

This thesis will begin with a review of the relevant literature, initially, a brief account of the condition of modern society will be given, giving context to a more in-depth consideration of Giddens' notion of reflexivity, using the work of Jennan T. Ismael and the 'situated self' to compliment and challenge this. Secondly, it will address theories on identity performance and management, influenced heavily by the original works of Erving Goffman, before consolidating these arguments with those of reflexivity to provide the theoretical basis from which this thesis is derived. The second part of the literature review will consider the nature of our relationships in the modern world, returning again to Giddens, exploring the relevancy of the transformation of intimacy and the emergence of the 'pure relationship'. An exploration of the literature on friendship will become relevant at this point also, as Giddens gives preference to romantic relationships, despite friendships having a series of expectations, obligations and balances to be made, almost equal to that of their romantic counterparts. Thirdly, the literature review will give an account of the existing knowledge on recognition using both philosophical and political sources, and identify the use of recognition for this thesis in more detail. Finally, the literature review will attempt a reconciliation of all of the above areas and extrapolate the links between them in a more linear manner. Throughout the review Internet literature and theory will be included where relevant, and again, a thorough summary of its potential relationship with the aforementioned concepts will be given at the end of the review.

Following this the methodology used for the research will be discussed, involving a justification of the research site, Facebook, an analysis of the transition of using ethnographic methods from the offline into the online, an assessment of the problems encountered and finally suggestions for improvement. After this an analysis of the data obtained for each case study, eating disorders, fetish lifestyles and the Goth subculture<sup>i</sup>, will be presented<sup>2</sup>. This will be followed by a final full chapter bringing the integrating the findings from the case

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<sup>2</sup> Although the stigmatisation of the identities used here is not strictly the interest of this thesis, the fact that stigmatised or problematic identities are being used cannot be ignored. As such this thesis makes use of terms such as subculture, deviance

studies collectively in relation to the initial literature review and the research questions that emerged from this. To finish the final conclusions of the thesis will be made, as well as suggestions for future research.

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and labelling on a frequent basis, subculture in particular is a contested term and the latter two are not obvious in meaning either. Whilst a full analysis of these terms is not appropriate or indeed necessary for this thesis some definitions of these terms as the research sees them have been provided as an end note.

# EVERYDAY IDENTITY MANAGEMENT AND RECOGNITION ONLINE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

As outlined in the introduction, this thesis examines the relationship between impression management, recognition, the value and meaning of friendship and community with relation to the identities performed on the SNS Facebook. The aim of this chapter is to review and analyse the existing literature surrounding identity, friendship, and recognition in turn, incorporating into each a discussion of the effects the Internet and more specifically Facebook have within each of these areas. There will be an attempt to connect and link the different themes to create a general theoretical narrative throughout; however to avoid too much repetition in each subsection this will occur predominantly in the penultimate section of the chapter with a more rigorous consideration of the online before any concluding remarks. The central argument generated in this literature review will be that the conditions of modern society have led to a particular focus on our relationships with others in order to establish our position in the world and to gain a sense of self which allows for the grounding of ontological security on a level which is unachievable elsewhere in an individual's life. An individual's identity however is argued as a primarily fractioned concept, meaning that we have multiple selves relevant to different contexts and different social groups, or audiences as they are predominantly referred to here. There is no actual core self, however the notion of a central self is generated from the multiple facets of self an individual has in order to allow them to reflexively 'map' their existence in the world and to aid them with processing the various and abundant information obtained from it.

There is a particular focus on the formation and maintenance of friendships, including both close and weaker ties, as being a neglected but it would seem fundamental aspect of generating an individual's identity. In the first instance this is due to friendships, after physical and structural constraints have provided a possible selection, being one of the strongest relationships of choice an individual has. Indeed this choice extends not

only to the formation of the friendship but also its continuation, which includes making an effort to offset temporal and spatial barriers. Friendships may be a direct indicator or reflection of a particular element of an individual's identity through their association with a particular context, activity or interest. However the meaning of a relationship stems from the wider practice of a negotiated disclosure and through it the generation of recognition, which serves to reinforce the identity of the individual, providing ontological security, but also the friendship which has emerged as a result of the presentation of self in question. There is therefore something of a cyclical relationship between an individual's relation to others and sense of self, and indeed it is argued here that hierarchies of self are formed through this process: not every self an individual entertains will hold the same meaning or value.

Facebook however presents a number of issues and questions for identity and particularly impression management. It will be established that on Facebook an individual is encouraged to bring multiple audiences into simultaneous existence into the same space, and therefore are, to use Goffman's (1959) terminology, within hearing distance of each other, and indeed within viewing distance. Due to the fractured nature of identity these different audiences will have at least partially and sometimes quite distinctly different perceptions of the individual, which each relevant group will consider to be 'true' or 'real' – especially if a spoiled identity and its associative audience is introduced (Goffman, 1963). Disruption to the performance of a particular identity can lead the audience members to question its trustworthiness, that is, its authenticity (Goffman, 1959), which will inhibit recognition and where it persists destabilise ontological security (for the individual and potentially their audience too). On Facebook the individual needs to negotiate a number of different impressions and performances in such a way that all audiences present remain satisfied with the performance given, so that recognition and ontological security may continue without impingement. Given the prominence of Facebook in everyday life this is a process and negotiation a substantial number of individuals will participate in on a daily basis. The question of *how* an individual manages their identity on Facebook and *why* they elect to present the self in this way, is of importance not only in understanding online identity but also for an understanding of everyday identity work.

# THE MODERN WORLD and THE REFLEXIVE SELF

## INTRODUCTION

It is acknowledged that what follows is not a full explanation of the conditions of modern social life, however it is sufficient to provide context to the arguments concerning the nature of identity and the self that are the focus of this literature review. Modern western society is fundamentally characterised by the development of individualism – in very basic terms meaning the rise of and an increase in importance given to the individual and the individual's needs, wants and desires over collective ones. Individualism has inevitably lead to changes in the structure and values of society, our interactions and relationships, and indeed all that contributes to the everyday life of the modern individual. Of particular interest here is the development of individualisation:

“...a process in which communities and personal relationships, social forms and commitments are less bound by history, place and tradition. That is, individuals, freed from the contexts of tradition, history, and under globalisation, space, are free to, and perhaps forced to, actively construct their own biographies and social bonds” (Miller, V., 2011, p.169).

More often than not such changes have been interpreted by sociologists and other social commentators as an intrinsically negative occurrence. It is suggested that as a result of individualism and individualisation alongside it our relationships with others have become more of a means to an end, a series of connections and ties, that are fleeting and easily replaceable. Whilst not denying that post-industrialism has seen a definitive shift from collective and community based identities and priorities to individually orientated ones, the application of this in an almost universal manner seems at odds with reality. Although this thesis primarily tackles issues of identity from an egocentric perspective, this does not entail a prerequisite that individuals are necessarily disconnected from broader structural, geographical and cultural constraints as influences in their sense of self and their social relationship 'choices'. It is the stance of this thesis that in a modern

western society individuals and their relationships are *less* bound by their historical and geographical background than in previous types of social formations, they are not wholly unbound, and are considerably less 'free' than many purport. Although issues of the self and identity are almost an obsessive compulsion in modern society (the rise of therapeutic discourse is alone a strong indication of this) and individualism certainly appears to be the moral philosophy of the time in capitalist societies at least, this does not give way to individualisation as a reality of the construction of the self and social life with it<sup>3</sup>. Developments in technology and transport mean that the individual is subjected to large amounts of information and life transitions which force them to make decisions and choices with a frequency that has arguably not been encountered in any previous history. However the options available to individuals are still restricted by their position in society and their personal and social history.

Giddens refers to living in the developed West as something akin to riding a juggernaut, and it is difficult to deny that individuals are faced with far greater sources and types of information than has been previously known. When encountered, new information can fundamentally alter an individual's perception of what is believed to be 'true' or common sense, which leaves expectations unfulfilled and may result in questioning a series of other 'truths'. The black swan theory commonly associated with Karl Popper (1959), although used by him in a somewhat different context, is an appropriate analogy of this process – it only takes one black swan after witnessing hundreds of white swans to decimate the upheld belief that all swans are white. The control an individual thought they had over their life becomes an uncertain factor and the very notion of who an individual thinks they are can be undermined in a matter of moments (Giddens, 1991: 38). Giddens' 'duality of structure' is also relevant here, whereby social structures are not only the means of agency, but are the outcomes also (Giddens, 1986). Society is not fixed or concrete, it is an active flow of social life, therefore structures have a type of virtual existence – exhibiting themselves in the social practices and memory traces of individuals, appearing as sets of rules and resources that individuals may (or may not) access in order to act in society (Elliot, 2003: 10-11). This thesis considers that individuals are, to an extent,

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussion of the rise of therapeutic culture and discourse see Furedi (2001) and (2003)

knowledgeable about their actions, their society, the rules and constraints placed upon them, and indeed ways in which to manipulate social structures for their advantage, which leads to the notion of reflexivity.

## **REFLEXIVITY**

What follows from individuals having possession of such knowledge described above, and being aware of the structures they actively produce and reproduce is the ability to engage in self-monitoring and consciously reflect on one's own actions and to assess the possible outcomes of these – that is the ability to be reflexive (Elliot and Turner, 2001: 296). Paul Willis' study *Learning to Labour* (1977) is one of the most renowned and explicit examples of the reflexivity of individuals, indeed Giddens uses this analysis himself. The working class 'lads' in Willis' research are very clearly aware of their position and role in society and also of the limitations certain social structures and institutions place upon them. In response the 'lads' adjust their behaviour and their construction of self to actively go against the rules of a middle class system, purposefully rebelling with an underlying knowledge that they cannot, or at least are extremely unlikely to, succeed even if they conformed.

Reflexivity is an essential skill in order to live in contemporary Western society. Due to being less bound by geographical and historical ties individuals have access to and are far more likely to encounter cultures, norms and experiences beyond their immediate social world, there is a vast amount of new and novel information being presented to individuals every day that may confer, add to or counter their beliefs, values and identities, and the resultant social practices they engage in. Reflexivity is the process by which individuals take account of new information, to assess it alongside what they already know and in turn reject, accept or assimilate the new information into their beliefs and actions. The purpose of reflexivity is the regulation and stabilization of our identities and of our roles in society in the face of constant interaction with potentially contradictory, and at least novel, information. It is, to use Giddens' terms, the individual's primary resource for maintaining ontological security – that being the human need for some sort of order and predictability, and to have something in which we can trust.

As has already been suggested, the erosion of time and space, arising from developments since the industrial revolution in travel, technology and new communication media has led to relationships being formed and maintained between individuals who are not necessarily geographically or historically linked, and indeed who may never actually meet face to face. As a result everyday activities are no longer formalised through kinship relations, and geographical localities no longer hold the same significance they once did (Held and Thompson, 1989: 278-9). In pre-industrial societies it is argued that ontological security, and trustworthy sources, could be found in close kinship systems, and further locality provided a firm basis for maintaining routine, individuals could trust in these features of their lives and could easily predict the course and outcome of their life from these (Giddens in Held and Thompson, 1989: 278). Instead, individuals put their trust in abstract tokens, such as money, and also expert systems, meaning those with apparent professional knowledge, training and skill (Held and Thompson, 1989: 279). However Giddens argues that such mechanisms, although practically might provide us with more safety and efficiency than those in traditional societies, do not provide the substantial psychological satisfaction needed. Such a situation is also complicated by the number of contradictory but seemingly trustworthy sources from which information emanates (Elliot, 2003: 50). Ontological security therefore has to be actively re-grounded in an individual's personal ties with other individuals, that is, individuals are forced to pursue the building of trust with each other, rather than its automatic instatement as said to be found in more traditional societies (Giddens, 1992). This, for Giddens, has led to an obsession with our relationships with others. Our personal and sexual lives and the relationships within them have been transformed into a series of projects, and are engaged with reflexively in order to assess how to maintain and improve a relationship, or indeed to gauge what relationships are no longer useful or fulfilling and can be discarded of (Giddens, 1992). This transformation and the nature of our relationships with others will be discussed further later in the review.

## A REFLEXIVE PROBLEM?

To summarise briefly, reflexivity in identity is a highly subjective, dynamic and cyclical process. Our sense of self is based on the information presented by the world around us, which is, with the duality of structure, in turn influenced by our sense of self. An individual's interpretation of information and the way in which it is used is guided by an individual's sense of self which is based on previous lived experience; the use of the information by the individual results in its perpetuation through action, but it is now tainted by our pre-existing notions, beliefs and ideas. This is of course how society proceeds to change, the information 'it' feeds to its members, is fed back in a, perhaps only slightly but nevertheless, different way. However "[o]nly a small, selected fraction of the data emanating from the world around us is ever perceived in any sense by the individual. And of this fraction, only a selected portion is in turn "chosen" in some sense by the individual to be interpreted" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 103).

The reflexive individual then does not process all of the stimuli and information that their social world presents to them. It is likely that they cannot do this either, as Giddens rightly suggests the modern world can be like riding a juggernaut at times. What the pioneers of reflexivity do not give is a detailed account of how and why the individual decides what information to process and what to do with that information once it has been processed. McCall and Simmons argue that "[t]he phase of interpretation, of assigning meaning to this fraction, is largely determined by the accumulated experiences and the role-identities of the individual, and it is creative in the sense that the meanings assigned are compounds of the qualities of the objects perceived and the qualities of the perceiver" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 103). Rather than give an explanation these processes are side-lined by labelling them as part of the individual's unconscious and as such this label is then enough justification not to discuss them.

Similarly there is a lack of consideration of the complexity of desires and emotions involved in the contradictions of experience and the sense of internal division (Craib, 1992). Individuals are often torn between actions that seem most logical, that conform to societies' will, that are concurrent with a particular social group's perspective and also actions that are perhaps deemed to reflect their sense of self most

accurately. This situation is likely to be exacerbated in a social space such as Facebook, an environment where information is limitless and instantaneously spread. In addition it is a platform where there are multiple audiences present of varying intimacies that will have different perceptions of the individual in question. The question of how individuals decide what self to display on their Facebook profiles may not only be an important one for understanding identity online, but potentially reveals some insight into the hierarchies of the dissemination of information and identity choice and presentation in everyday life more broadly.

Further, an individual might well reflexively acknowledge the best or most appropriate option available to them, but that does not necessarily mean it will be the option the individual takes (Elliot and Turner, 2001: 301). An identity may be too important to the individual's sense of self to ignore. Human beings are not wholly mathematically logical creatures, individuals will make decisions and choices that to the external witness may seem inexplicable and nonsensical, yet there will be some reasoning behind them. Whether conscious or not the justifications we have for making a choice and taking a particular action as a result of that choice will be based in something, they must be grounded from some experience, some knowledge, which will have some emotional attachment to them. Yet the question is then begged in what is that experience and knowledge situated? It does not just appear, it comes from the social world around us, yet as it has been considered above, the worlds of individuals will not be the same, and even the same social environment will be interpreted and reacted to differently by different individuals. Giddens' analysis does not give any particular explanation of why individuals make one decision opposed to another, or why individuals make different decisions given similar structural, environmental and historical background. It needs to be noted that an analysis of the individual psyche is not what is being purported here. Instead what is sought is a deeper understanding of what social reasons result in alternative reflexive choices for those who otherwise appear to be relatively similar.

## MAPPING THE REFLEXIVE SELF

Jennan Ismael's (2007) notion of the 'situated self' is a useful theoretical framework to consider in more detail at this point. Not only is it representative of online identities, but it also advances the account of reflexivity. The self for Ismael is a reflexive representation of an individual, which is in a constant state of relocation, meaning that the self is egocentrically mapped "through representation and the creation of locational context" (Miller, V., 2011, p.172). Ismael's ideas stem from the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1992) who argues that:

"[W]e are virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, more or less unified, but sometimes disunified, and we always put the best "faces" on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the center of that autobiography is one's self. And if you still want to know what the self really is, you are making a category mistake" (Dennett, 1992: 114).

The idea of having a core self is according to Dennett fictional, and the presentation of a single self is simply a story created to appease the individual but also importantly their varying and potentially opposing surrounding contacts and connections. This single self is not something that actually exists in reality and is removed to varying extents from any of an individual's actual identities. The argument is phrased in a largely narrative terminology; however it is easily applicable to Facebook as a representation of self. Although not a fully constructed narrative, Facebook profiles present a unified, centred self that has seemingly been created from various facets of the individual's experiences and relationships.

Dennett's reasoning behind this argument is based on a simple biological consideration of the brain which Ismael describes:

"[I]f we look to the scientific image of the mind, we find nothing in the head for the 'I' of the internal monologue to refer to... There is nothing but multiple processing streams, a collection of autonomous sensorimotor subsystems, and nonintersecting causal and

informational pathways leading from the sensory surfaces directly into the motor pathways... that neither requires nor supports talk of an inner self" (Ismael, 2007: 202).

Quite simply what Dennett argues is that there is no physical part of the brain which could possibly contain a core self. Ismael notes that "[t]here is a genuinely new and interesting form of antirealism here, one that forces a confrontation between the increasingly decentralized view of the mind coming out of cognitive neuroscience and the centralization suggested talk of an inner self" that we find in the common language of everyday life (Ismael, 2007: 202). These two ideas are to all intents and purposes opposing arguments, and there is no simple solution to the dilemma – in academic and theoretical terms and also as a practical task for all individuals. Indeed, it could be suggested that profiles on SNSs give illustration of how individuals are to some extent attempting to negotiate these two contradictions; those being the acceptance and performance of fragmented and changing selves that are contextually dependent, and on the other hand, the increasing pressure (and need with regard to ontological security) to present a somewhat stable and unified, core self that satisfies the question of 'who we are' to ourselves and others.

However this simple biological and scientific view of the brain is problematic. On its own the fact that there is no physical compartment or explicit activity within the brain for a centred self, does not automatically negate its existence, at least not in a sociological sense. For example, love, or the feeling of being in love, does not have a clearly defined compartment in the brain or anywhere in the body; it is a result of a multitude of biological and physiological occurrences and also psychological and social activity and action. Love is not something that physically exists, however it is real to the individuals who experience it. Whilst there are multiple ways of performing and practicing love there are few who could not give a detailed description of the meaning and feeling of being in love. The centred self then may not therefore be fictional in the sense that Dennett is implying, if the experience of it and importantly the effects of it are real with tangible consequences.

Ismael, however, moves away from a biologically formed notion of self and identity, and argues that the use of the notion of a centred self is "a useful fiction that faithfully tracks the gross movements of the body and

that abstracts from microfacts that introduce irrelevant mathematical complexity. We tell it to others, and get wrapped up in it ourselves, spinning it into a blissful unconsciousness of the complex interactions that actually regulate behaviour” (Ismael, 2007: 204). The same of which could be applied to the concept of ‘love’ and other essentially socially constructed concepts. Although fictional in a direct physical sense, a centred self and the complications associated with it are not defunct in the everyday negotiations of individuals. In other words, the fact that a core self may not actually physically exist does not necessarily result in its absence psychologically, socially and emotionally. As well as this, Ismael recognises the importance of the role of the unconscious and emotion in the construction of identity, arguing “It [the core self] has both quality and content, and to capture its qualitative aspects we need to widen our view of phenomenology beyond the sensory qualities that tend to dominate philosophical discussion to include the less clearly defined conative and emotional components that contribute to the full, felt quality of life” (Ismael, 2007: 207). Therefore the centred self should still be considered as an important element of individuals’ identity formation and maintenance, and should not be disregarded as some fanciful creation, only endured because it is seen as something simpler than trying to address real identity issues.

In summarising this and the criticisms of Dennett Ismael argues:

“Dennett is absolutely correct that if we really want to understand what selves are, we should be looking not for an inner self to serve as subject for our self-portraits, but at how a self centred portrait of the world is pieced together by the Joycean Machine from a set of autonomous informational streams. But I strongly dispute the suggestion that the resulting monologue is a just-so story fabricated for an external audience with no role in the intrinsic dynamics of the body... The denial that there are selves is misleading because it mistakes a self-centred portrait for a portrait of a central, substantial self, and

the assimilation to self-organizing systems misses the important unifying role that a self-centred portrait can play” (2007: 205)<sup>4</sup>.

The fictional centred self is, as previously mentioned, a way of individuals attempting to make sense of and bring together the varying contexts and situations they exist in, for themselves and also for the others involved in these. It is not as Dennett suggests, created through a meaningless and random selection of factors that make up an individual’s identity. It is instead, a thoughtful process, which whether done explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, is not simple randomness, it is structured and formed in a way that is designed to assist the individual in being able to act and successfully live in a world which forces them, as Goffman argues into a multitude of roles and contexts, many of which may require very different presentations of the self<sup>5</sup>. Individuals are likely to be aware that the self presented and evident on SNS profiles is not a true core self, but is, to use Ismael’s term, “a portrait” of various aspects of their multiple selves from their offline worlds.

Such a self is self-centred as it is orientated solely on the individual and created from a variety of identities and roles, rather than these identities and roles being created from it. In essence, the many facets of an individual’s identity have already been centred to allow them to make sense of the world surrounding them. It is plausible then that in order to allow for successful interaction with multiple audiences, typically familiar with differing roles and presentations of the individual, the self presented on Facebook is akin to the centred self that Ismael describes. The Facebook self however is not necessarily the same as the centred self as there may be elements of it which are deemed inappropriate for consumption by all audiences, instead the

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<sup>4</sup> Dennett labels the production of a centred self the ‘Joycean Machine’, which “selectively culls information from this cacophony of nonconsciousness, nonintersecting casual and informational pathways and transforms it into a first-personal portrait of the world that casts its narrator and protagonist in the role of agent” (Ismael, 2007: 204). Whilst the notion of a Joycean Machine itself is quite useful, the disconnected and fickle characteristics Dennett gives assigns to it, are not.

<sup>5</sup>Ismael gives further critique of Dennett and the contradictions and complications in his arguments towards the end of *The Situated Self* which are however not particularly important for the purposes here (see *The Many Voices of Dennett*, p. 211)

Facebook self may be considered a re-centred self<sup>6</sup>. The re-centred self then is potentially a much more conscious form of delineating between different identities, with careful selection of appropriate elements of identity to display. This leads immediately to a second difference; the re-centred self is a self that it exists in a space outside of the individual's consciousness unlike the centred self and therefore would need active identity work and management.

The fictional element of the re-centred self on Facebook would be not that it does not exist, but that it is not reflective of the individual as they are known to any particular other in any particular context or situation. The re-centred self may, as Ismael argues for the centred self, assist the individual in bringing the varying realms of their life worlds to settle and co-exist together. However, it may not be particularly useful in terms of ontological security as it is by its very construction not a self that others will fully *recognise*. Although this idea will be discussed in more detail towards the end of the review it is worth giving a brief expansion at this point. McCall and Simmons (1978) describe the state of reflexivity for the modern individual in a more poetic way than most: "Man is, then, a brooding animal, concerned about his past actions and looking forward to the future with mingled hopes and fears. Anxiety and ambivalence are for him a way of life. Acting always on inadequate and biased information, man makes his crucial life choices and allocates his very limited resources" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 40). The reflexive nature and the construction of identity is not only a way for the individual to understand their self and the world around them, but is also (as emphasized in the work of Goffman which will be discussed forthwith), a performance for others, that must make sense and appear legitimate to them also. Again, McCall and Simmons phrase this suitably: "[I]t is perhaps not so hard to legitimate our actions to ourselves, from our own egocentric perspectives, but our fellows remain harsh judges... We must persuade others, *as well as ourselves*, that things are indeed as we construe them" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 40, 41). The reason that individuals must convince others of their performance is not only for social acceptance and group solidarity at its face value but for the fulfilment of recognition, having the self (or indeed multiple selves) recognised by others confirms to the individual that their identity is

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<sup>6</sup> By inappropriate, a stigmatised or problematic identity is not necessarily the only consideration here – it may be content about work and therefore not appropriate for colleagues to see, or perhaps a request for information that only a particular audience would be able to help with.

secure and can be relied upon regardless of the juggernaut of information that surrounds us. This is a potential reason as to why, as Giddens (1992) argued, individuals are obsessed with their relationships with others – recognition may only be fulfilled through others, which in turn provides individuals with the desired ontological security.

Ismael concurs with Giddens that our identities are reflexive in nature, that is, we draw upon a multitude of pieces of information and alter our courses of action, behaviours and beliefs as a result. Yet he goes further to give a detailed explanation of how individuals negotiate the information they encounter. Ismael argues that we are guided by 'self-centred maps' which "are not fictional portraits of an inner subject, but portraits of the world, like maps with red dots, centred reflexively on the body, and – in more articulated versions – on the mind" (Ismael, 2007: 206-7)<sup>7</sup>. We have streams of consciousness, like those contained in the works of Joyce, that jump from the present, to thoughts of the past and of the future and all of which Ismael argues are all a part of the Joycean stream that Dennett identifies (see footnote 2). The human stream of consciousness is extremely complex, but put simply "[t]here is constant rehashing, reorganization, and reflection...It's all organised into a coherent picture of a developing world as seen through your eyes, from your changing position in space and time" (Ismael, 2007: 207). Yet where our self-centred maps come into their most beneficial use with this stream of consciousness is in the process of making a decision:

"The Joycean Machine isn't there just to paint a pretty picture for an external audience, it creates a representational environment in which we can bring all of the information accumulated over a history of experience to bear on the here and now" (Ismael, 2007: 208).

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<sup>7</sup> Ismael uses the analogy of a ship, which includes the vessel itself, the crew, the computer systems and all that supports it to illustrate the idea of a self-centred map – in order for a route to be co-ordinated not only must the location be known of the ship itself, represented by a red dot, but also of the world around it. All systems on the ship, from the navigation system to the direct actions of the crew guide the ship through to its desired location, using the information gathered on its surroundings to find the best route with which to get there. Should, for example, a storm emerge to prevent the ship taking a certain route, another alternative route will be negotiated to accommodate this new known piece of information, and the cycle will continue in this manner to ensure the ship reaches its desired destination. Ismael argues "We can increase the complexity of the computation in ways that make it look more like our own deliberative process by allowing flexibility in destination, balancing of multiple competing ends, and so on" (Ismael, 2007: 206).

The body, and the mind, must be located within the context of the rest of the world, past, present and future. Without this context and knowledge, alongside the self-centred map, the individual would be unable to make a decision. They would have no logic or experience to base their judgement on, and no concept of the potential outcomes of such a judgement, or in which direction it would be preferable to move towards. “When you’re deciding how to act, you take stock of what you know about the world and your situation in it, and you compare that with the way you would like to be” (Ismael, 2007: 210). This is closely related to the mind’s ‘effective perspective’, that is, the part of the mind that tells itself how changes in its own state feed back into the world it is located within. It is a cyclical process, and is a process that Ismael argues is made possible largely through the existence of the mind being present in a single body: “If we changed bodies regularly, or if the connections between skin and skull were not fixed, things would be more complicated... As it is, the fact that incoming and outgoing pathways converge on a body and that bodies travel continuous paths through space places enough constraints on the computation that it is soluble” (Ismael, 2007: 209). By this Ismael means that the body is intrinsic to identity as it is the vessel through which individuals experience the world. Crucially, different bodies will have different experiences and therefore knowledge of the world which will in turn shape the body owner’s identities.

On a related note, our centred identities, or our self-portraits, can also be independent of their various parts. Ismael likens this to waves of the sea which maintain their “structural integrity and can be tracked over time” but are by their very nature “composed of different parts at every point” in their history (Ismael, 2007: 221). This is again potentially relatable to the self presented on Facebook. Its core components, one being the individual themselves but also being the basic information about that person, remain structurally similar over time, however the plethora of content added to Facebook in the form of likes, status updates, photos and so on, are specific to the given moment in time. However, unlike with the wave analogy, these traces of self do not get washed away back into the Joycean machine, instead they remain – perhaps over time hidden but nevertheless – accessible not only to the individual but to their audiences too. This again forces the question of how recognisable the self presented on Facebook is and also raises a new facet of how individuals manage ‘the past’.

Our self-centred maps are what unify the various independent strands of an individual's identity, and this map keeping subsystem's purpose is to bring together informational streams that were separated upon their entry into the body, and, into the mind, "by mapping them into an internal reconstruction of the external environment" (Ismael, 2007: 222). This is very much in line with Giddens' concept of reflexivity, whereby he argues that new information is internalised and situated within our existing sense of self and value system. Ismael argues that there are three types of unity created from this process. First is synthetic unity, which is the process by which the mind organises the information that passes through it, so that all information about a particular object (be this inanimate, a person, a theory or so on) can be stored and retained in a single space. Synthetic unity is equivalent to a filing cabinet "where information about a common external source is stored at a common internal location regardless of the time and place at which it was obtained and the internal pathway through which it passed" (Ismael, 2007: 223). However this 'filing cabinet' is not inflexible, it is reflexively managed, with new information added to old, misinformation removed and so on.

The second type of unity is univocity, which "resolves the cacophony of voices in the brain into a single coherent stream" (Ismael, 2007: 223). This is where Dennett's notion of the Joycean Machine becomes useful again – it assists in giving the mind a singular voice, a self-centred portrait, or indeed a re-centred self<sup>8</sup>. This is not the same as synthetic unity which is the collection and organisation of incoming information, univocity is the organisation of multiple selves and the contradictions within them that are formed from synthetic unity. In essence, synthetic unity organises the information and univocity makes sense of it. Univocity is the transition of the various selves and their voices into one coherent self and voice. Importantly, "[i]ntegration of the informational streams leading from sensory surfaces and experiential memory is something the brain does for us; integration of the voices of past selves, by contrast, is the hard-won product of self-conscious discipline and work", emphasizing that identity is not something which is merely bestowed upon us, it requires continual work and maintenance, yet is arguably a task that will never be completed (Ismael, 2007: 225). This is congruent with that previously argued about the amount of and rate at which

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<sup>8</sup> It should be reiterated here, that the Joycean Machine is the *mouth piece* from which the single voice emanates, it is the method of creating a coherent centred self, not the centred self itself (Ismael, 2007: 226)

information is presented to the individual and which might challenge their current knowledge. Such information does not need to be from some external locus however, it can instead be generated and reinforced through our interactions with others – leading to the next type of unity.

The third and final form of unity is dynamical unity, which individuals use, now armed with a centred self, to interact with other individuals. Dynamical unity has two elements to it. The first is external, and concerns being able to communicate and form relationships with others, so that one centred self can interact with another centred self. The second element is internal, allowing individuals, to work together “making a co-ordinated effort in pursuit of a common goal” (Ismael, 2007: 227). This is somewhat akin to Goffman’s arguments on performances, roles and identity within the context of a team (these ideas will be examined more closely next). Ultimately “[l]ife, as far as man is a social being, consists in coming together with others in order to do things. In fact, a person’s whole life history can be viewed as nothing more than a long series of interpersonal encounters, liberally garnished with expectations and remembrances, as most biographies attest” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 11). This highlights the importance of others for an individual’s sense of self and construction of our identity. The (waves of) experiences encountered with others feed back into an individual’s Joycean stream and so continues the cycle. Human beings are fundamentally social creatures, we need others in order to progress and transform individually as well as collectively and also for developing ontological security.

To summarise before considering the relationships between individuals more closely, “...our self-portraits are not portraits of an inner self, but self-centred portraits of an objective world, evolving in tandem with that world, and retaining a record of their own history” (Ismael, 2007: 211). From the outside self-portraits appear as a unified self, that is, as a centred-self. However, not all of the information we encounter is consciously processed, to go through all stimulus in turn as separate components is unlikely to be physically possible, and secondly, ultimately detrimental to the individual’s ability to make sense of their world. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the juggernaut description of the world given by Giddens. However there is one point of contestation to be made here with Ismael’s identification of an objective world. If objective is meant in the traditional sense that the social world exists separately and detached from the individuals who live in it,

it is at this point that a departure is made from Ismael's arguments. As outlined in the discussion of Giddens' theory of reflexivity society exists in a dualistic relationship with the individuals who live in it, they both make and are made by society in both known and unknown ways. The world is not an objective one, for at the very least that we cannot know whose Joycean Machine is telling the 'truth'. Whilst Ismael gives a more detailed description of the mapping processes experienced by individuals during reflexivity, it is largely a philosophical argument. How these ideas work in practice is a question that remains to be answered. Although the self presented on Facebook is not necessarily directly relatable to the centred self discussed by Ismael, it does potentially offer a somewhat tangible insight into the decisions individuals make concerning the development and presentation of their selves which is beyond structure but not limited to psychology. Emphasis on relationships with others is given by all of the literature considered thus far, however there has not been a consideration of how the variations in individuals' relationships might result in different processing of information and therefore alternative presentations of self.

## **ROLES, AUDIENCES and IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT**

“All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify” (Goffman, 1959: 78).

So far the relevant characteristics of modern society and the emergence of a reflexive identity have been discussed. At this point it needs to be considered in more detail that we do not always present a constant and centred identity, we engage in a process of impression management relevant to particular contexts and audiences. Erving Goffman has written extensively on identity performance and management, both in general terms and more specifically for those with spoiled or stigmatised identities, and he argues that individuals project different performances depending on the context and audience(s) present. To begin the 'personal front' is where an individual represents them self in a particular setting to a 'public' audience (Goffman, 1959). “[W]hen the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole” (Goffman, 1959: 45). Individuals are limited in terms of the resources available to them in constructing and maintaining an identity, and as argued above, although the development and expansion of communication technologies has given individuals more flexibility and reflexivity in their sense and construction of self, individuals are not unshackled from notions of tradition, history, and geography. Indeed as Giddens argues, and Willis' lads (amongst others) exemplify, individuals are bound by structure. Goffman argues further:

“[a]s human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with mood and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs...A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time” (Goffman, 1959: 63-4).

Meaning, in front of an audience we must repeatedly present a coherent, consistent, and believable self so that the performance might be 'trusted' – furthermore in order to comply with social norms and conventions the individual must retain emotional or impulsive behaviour as much as possible.

As a consequence of performances being required to take into account the norms of society, the norms of specific social worlds and contexts within this, and those of the related audiences “[a]lthough particular performances, and even particular parts or routines, may place a performer in a position of having nothing to hide, somewhere in the full round of his activities there will be something he cannot treat openly” (Goffman, 1959: 71). Some level of deception is a part of all of our identities, and Goffman (1963) refers to this as information control; a particularly important feature of impression management for those with problematic identities. The extent to which an individual may engage with information control as a means of concealment of an undesirable or stigmatised self is dependent on a number of other factors, of importance here are what Goffman (1963) refers to as ‘visibility’, ‘known-about-ness’ and ‘obtrusiveness’ (Goffman, 1963, p.64-6). Visibility is quite literally the extent to which the stigmatising element can be seen by others, known-about-ness is other’s prior knowledge of the stigma existing (from having directly seen it or hearing about it through others) and obtrusiveness is whether the stigma causes a break in communication (Goffman, 1963). Considering the interplay between Facebook and the offline, the extent to which any of these occur in the offline is highly likely to effect the type of self presented and the impression management techniques engaged with on this social platform.

Whilst an individual’s differing roles and performances are kept separate (very often intentionally, but also, it should not be forgotten, due to the arrangements, constraints and dynamics of social life) deception does not present a significant problem, as the discrepancies between performances are unlikely to be discovered. Issues potentially arise however where an attempt is made as it is on Facebook to collate the varying roles and contexts an individual engages in to a single space. It may become apparent to an audience that an aspect of the individual which is of utmost importance to them, is hidden from other audiences, or vice versa an audience may discover an element of the individual they had no prior knowledge of. In either scenario the authenticity of the performance associated with the individual is placed into question, inevitably creating

tension between the individual and their audiences. Role conflict, that is, the tension created when an individual must fulfil two or more incompatible or at least uncomplimentary roles, may occur without audiences coming into contact with each other and will often remain an internal battle for the individual to resolve (Goffman, 1959). However, the prospect of the conflicting roles and their associative audiences coming into direct contact with each other will exacerbate the distress caused to the individual as any methods they have used in order to minimise the feeling of conflict are likely to be undone. For individuals with problematic identities the consequences of this could be severe.

One means Goffman (1963) identifies of coping with a stigmatised identity and the role conflict created by it is what he calls passing, made possible when an individual's "differentness is not immediately known... when in fact he [sic] is a discreditable, not a discredited, person" (Goffman, 1963, p.57). Passing is information control and management – "[t]o display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (Goffman, 1963, p.57). Even if the stigmatising identity is removed from the equation, many of these questions will still apply to the individual constructing and maintaining a self on Facebook, in fact the content on Facebook is a direct result of millions of individuals deciding what to display or not on a daily basis. In addition to passing is covering, which is exactly what it sounds like – the attempt to cover or veil the stigmatising identity, to minimise its obviousness or the most objectionable elements of it. Goffman (1963) states that "[i]t is a fact that persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma (in many cases because it is known about or immediately apparent) may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large" (Goffman, 1963, p.125). The processes by which an individual may attempt to cover their identity are likely to be similar, or exactly the same, as those engaged with in passing as "what will conceal a stigma from unknowing persons may also ease matters for those in the know" (Goffman, 1963, p.125-6). However, it should be considered that even with initially successful information control or 'toning down' of the problematic identity the potential for disruption in the future is significantly increased on a social platform such as Facebook. A single wall post, photo comment, tagged photo and so on, could expose that which is meant to remain hidden. Though the act in itself may not be a malicious attempt to discredit the individual's representation of their self, the

repercussions are unlikely to be any less damaging, and again this is more pertinent for those with identities which are considered taboo or deviant.

Discrepancies in performances are significant as where the actor's performance has been highlighted as inconsistent, that performance is then questioned and doubted. However, "[s]ometimes when we ask whether a fostered impression is true or false we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give the performance in question, and are not primarily concerned with the actual performance itself" (Goffman, 1959: 66). Goffman was referring here to technical expertise or academic knowledge of a role in more formal contexts, however this argument also seems applicable to interpersonal relationships. Where a self is encountered that conflicts with the presentation typically encountered, the assumption may be made that the new performance is 'real', and therefore the problem lay with previous performance now seen as a façade. In turn the individual and their identity become at least partially unrecognisable, and in Ismael's terms unity and the ability to work together is broken, jeopardising ontological security.

If an individual has previously convinced differing groups of different selves to be legitimate and to all intents and purposes 'true', a re-centred self, suggested as a possible presentation of self on Facebook, which is not directly akin to any other self will force the legitimacy of the individual to be questioned. "Personal identities serve as the pegs upon which social identities and biographies can be hung. If an individual could not be recognized from one occasion to another as the same person, no stable social relationships could be constructed, and therefore there would be no social identities at all" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 63). Although the individual will have the same physical characteristics on Facebook as in the offline world and therefore are physically recognisable, the re-centred self through its very construction will often be subtly but potentially dramatically different to any other presentation of self.

In addition to performing as an individual, Goffman also argues that individuals will often perform as part of what he labels a 'team'. Teams consist of individuals of the same status (meaning their social class, gender, profession, and so on), and are formed on the premise of portraying a particular image or representation of a themselves as a group, to other teams who are constructed of individuals with statuses considered to be

above or below their own teams. As often only a single common status connects the team members, “a set of individuals who might be dissimilar in important respects, and hence desirous of maintaining social distance from one another, find they are in a relation of enforced familiarity characteristic of team-mates engaged in staging a show” (Goffman, 1959: 89). McCall and Simmons (1978), confirm this point, stating that “by virtues of our positions in the social structure, we are thrown together willy-nilly with just those persons who we are similarly situated”. Importantly however individuals “...come to like some of those with whom we are thrown together” through other shared interests (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 27). So, from a formal and somewhat forced setting, interpersonal friendships emerge inside of the team, which Goffman labels cliques.

Cliques may tacitly perform a particular role as the team does, do not necessarily “function to protect the individual from persons of other ranks but from persons of his own rank. Thus, while all the members of one’s clique may be of the same status level, it may be crucial that not all persons of one’s status level may be allowed into the clique” (Goffman, 1959: 89-90). Cliques are not given the same consideration as teams however, and a question is left unanswered: if a shared status has led to the formation of a clique, what leads to a clique’s exclusion of others who also share that status? It could be suggested that there is a secondary status order within a team, gender for example, and even with that further separation by other status rankings in society. However, these would be better described as sub-teams rather than a wholly separate entity as they are still formed in the same manner as teams. If cliques are something different to teams, the question of their formation potentially centres on the criteria for establishing and maintaining a *friendship* – the absence of this element will be considered below.

Goffman does give some attention to more intimate interpersonal relationships in his discussion of the back regions, where “the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo his speaking lines, and step out of character... the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (Goffman, 1959: 115, 116). In the back regions the individual is amongst other team members, there is no longer a requirement to present a unity of identity. However, as would make sense

with the existence of cliques, within a back region there are still limitations to discarding of a persona when the individual remains in a team situation. There are three reasons for this:

“First, when the audience is not present, each member of the team is likely to want to sustain the impression that he can be trusted with the secrets of the team and that he is not likely to play his part badly when the audience is present... Secondly, there are often moments backstage when the performers will have to sustain one another’s morale and maintain the impression that the show that is about to be presented will go over well or that the show that has just been presented did not really go over badly. Thirdly, if the team contains representatives of fundamental social divisions, such as different age-grades, different ethnic groups, etc., then some discretionary limits will prevail on freedom of back stage activity” (Goffman, 1959: 130-1).

Individuals are therefore limited in the times where they can ‘be themselves’ and the question of what being ‘yourself’ means remains, which makes sense concerning Ismael’s concept of the centred self being constructed of multiple selves and not the other way around. The performances individuals engage in are not fake identities; they are real, believed by both the performer and the audience. One cannot perform convincingly if there is not an intrinsic knowledge or experience of what is being performed – it must be a part of the individual, but it is not necessarily the whole of the individual. However an actor may perform the same, or at least a very similar routine to more than one audience. Just as it is convenient to keep audiences separate that require different performances, it is also “convenient to separate the different audiences one has for the same routine, since that is the only way in which each audience can feel that while there may be other audiences for the same routine, none is getting so desirable a presentation of it” (Goffman, 1959: 138).

However, where the re-centred self is potentially encountered on Facebook, this could become increasingly difficult to manage. Where two audiences exist in the same space that require a similar routine or presentation of self, they will come to realise that they are not unique or ‘special’ to the individual. In fact, all

relationships potentially become reduced to the same performance. Groups of close friends largely kept separate and relatively unaware of each other who assume they hold the closest tie to the individual and *know* the individual best of all may come to find that their relationship with the individual is not substantially different. This is exacerbated where it is seen that the time and attention of the individual is at any one point being given to another group, or that one group is distinctly prioritised over the other and indeed this may be true of individual friendships within the groups as well. Such is affirmed by Goffman when he argues that problems may arise where an individual is forced within one space to “handle different audiences at the same time. If the different audiences come within hearing distance of each other, it will be difficult to sustain the impression that each is receiving special and unique services” (Goffman, 1959: 138). Again, the consequence of which is the depletion of trust in the performance and in turn the individual and the relationship with them, leading to a breakdown of recognition and consequently ontological security for all involved.

Theories of impression management “typically omit the most important “reference point” of all, the reflective self of the individual in question” which is the central “variable intervening between the antecedent events of the social world and the consequent actions of the individual” (McCall and Simmons, 1978, p. 7, 8). Part of impression management is being reflexive concerning the feedback received from relevant audiences, team members and cliques, the micro and macro contexts in which the social behaviour takes place and also past experiences. This reflexivity is what distinguishes real life from actors on the stage, the subtle nuances between the individuals who construct each team, clique or audience, and of those who is present or absent at a given time, situated within a combination of societal, local and group norms and expectations which change over time all contribute to a fluid and transitory performance. As the performance occurs it unconsciously alters the remembrance of performances that have come before it and those simultaneous to it, but also a break or deviation in the performance can fundamentally impact upon the nature of that performance for its foreseeable future, as is the nature of reflexivity. Should an actor in a play trip and fall on their face and subsequently forget their lines, this is not integrated into any subsequent performances. In the next performance the actor will complete the script as if the previous performance never occurred and

perhaps aside from some mockery there is no particular lasting impact of getting part of the performance wrong. Real life is not quite so convenient, and this is only exacerbated by a space such as Facebook with the presence of multiple audiences.

Furthermore the details of friendship groups, their performances and therefore their role in identity formation are once again largely pushed aside, despite the acknowledgement of some collective identity performances through teams and cliques. If friendships are formed through preferred selection of team members they are, more than most other relationships, a matter of choice. Why an individual chooses to be friends with one person and not another who share a status is paramount to an individual's and others' perceptions of who we are and the construction of our selves. McCall and Simmons (1978) have broadly criticised theories of impression management on the basis that they ignore friendship groups in their analysis. They argue that the emphasis on "abstract social categories and of aspired but unfamiliar formal associations in providing standards by means of which the person can orientate his strivings" misses the "more pervasive influence of concrete relationships and social groups in shaping frames of reference" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 7). This indicates that friendship groups have a substantial impact in grounding an individual's sense of self and generating meaning for belonging, and this relates to our preoccupation with relationships as emotional sources of ontological security. In addition to this the reason as to why one person is selected as a friend over another within the same setting may provide insight into the reflexive process and the construction of identity, in its most simplistic form by revealing what is considered to be important to the individual but also by considering what elements of the other's self the individual has integrated into their own identity and performances.

## I'LL BE THERE FOR YOU: FRIENDS AND FRIENDSHIP

The criticisms made so far in regards to friendship are not that the literature has failed to give a full theoretical account of friendship, there is only so much any theorist can hope to achieve, but more that it has not been acknowledged as an area of any particular importance. Friendship is not merely a gap in sociological considerations of identity, as a whole it is largely missing from sociological analysis. Allan (1998) argues that:

“The study of personal relationships has developed enormously over the last 20 years. In part, this has involved what might be regarded as a paradigmatic shift in focus away from an over-riding concern with the characteristics and properties of individuals to one in which relationships are viewed as emergent... In some regards, though, sociology has played a rather small part in this... the integration of a sociological perspective... has been slow” (Allan, 1998, p. 685-6).

In the past friendship has been confined to the ‘private sphere’ and is further made subordinate to other sociological areas of interest, such as structure and community (Eve, 2002). Indeed in the late 1980s it was claimed that friendship only had sociological significance if it transcended the boundaries of other sociological topics, such as class or race, and otherwise had no contribution to shaping an individual’s life course (Garrett, 1989). As stated above, Giddens (1992) largely ignores friendship, preferring to focus on sexual relationships between men and women, and the few times friendship is mentioned, it is largely feminised. Concepts such as ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ ties are much more common in sociological study (for example, Grieco, 1987 and Granovetter, 1973), and have become popularised further with the rise of the Internet and the persistent popularity of SNSs such as Facebook. Michael Eve (2002) argues that friendships can provide significant insight into the way that social categories such as class reproduce themselves, and the particular habitus, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, individuals and communities have. However more recently there has been a growing interest in friendship in its own right and specifically what being ‘a friend’ means alongside the obligations and actions are involved within a friendship.

## THE MEANING OF FRIENDSHIP

Adam Silver (1990) accounted for the history of friendship pre- and post-eighteenth century, when he argued that with the emergence of commercial society there was a significant shift towards friendship as a reflection of identity. As a result, friendships are increasingly regarded as specialised, in that each friendship is maintained only for a particular activity or purpose. The notion of specialised relationships is not a new one and does not only apply to friendships but all of an individual's connections, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists such as Simmel (1908), Tönnies (2001 [1887]) and Wirth (1938) mapped the destruction of community connectivity in the wake of individual, specialised associations. In addition to this the consideration of friendship as a relationship of choice has led to its regard as highly individualised and personalised, in other words as being specific to the individual (Simmel, 1908; Beck, 2002 and Bauman, 2001). In turn friendship is also attributed to being the most direct reflection of self, and an individual's choice of friends as an affirmation of their identity. It is this presentation of friendship however that has led to its past neglect as a topic worthy of sociological research or interest. Specialised friendships of choice are seen as shallow and superficial, a product of "an identity-obsessed modern society" at the expense of traditional, meaningful relationships (Pahl, 2002: 412).

However, Pahl and Spencer (2001) found friendship still had considerable meaning and there were both moral and practical obligations to be fulfilled, accompanied by disappointment and annoyance if they were not (cited in Pahl, 2002: 416). They also found that although friendship could be somewhat differentiated, it was not as straightforward as one activity for one friend, and further any individual would have a mixture of both simpler and more complex friendships (Pahl, 2002: 416). Although individuals would perhaps only engage in a specific activity together, whilst doing so the friendship would provide other satisfaction – through coming together over a specific interest friendships were able to develop into deeper relationships.

Furthermore, Giordano (1995) argues that having a variety of different types of friendships is valuable and a wider network of non-intimate friendships is crucial for forming identity and for understanding the inhabited

social world. In this case, less meaningful friendships are productive for a sense of self and ontological security through enabling individuals to make sense of the world around them. Giordano further recognises the importance of communication by text in friendship through exploring messages left in yearbooks of high school students (Giordano, 1995: 663-4). These messages were carefully constructed and planned, were meaningful and important to both the owner of the yearbook and the message leaver. The continued significance of text in friendship can be seen in a Finnish study concerning the messaging behaviour of teenagers aged 13-18 years old (Katz and Aukhus, 2002:188-9). Messages were carefully constructed and thought out before being sent, and a particular ritual of writing messages into notebooks so they can be kept and re-read at a later time was developed, indicating the receiver counted them as meaningful also (Katz and Aukhus, 2002: 178). However, both pieces of research concern younger individuals, therefore to what extent the conclusions apply to the widespread population on Facebook is unclear. Furthermore, technological developments since 2002 negate the need to write texts in an alternative source. In addition texts would have cost 12-15 pence at the time of the research, whereas they are now typically free, so SMS messages are likely to be diluted with less carefully constructed content.

Any text based message is unlikely to appropriate the meaning and intensity of the connection between two individuals, but they can however let someone know that they are thought of and thus be an aid to the maintenance of a friendship. Miller, V. (2008) argues that this type of communication, which he calls phatic culture, has become a dominant form in online social media. Phatic culture is “non-dialogic and non-informational”, by which Miller, V. means that the text has no particular meaning in and of itself, it is not necessarily encouraging a conversation and nor is it providing any new or interesting information (Miller, V., 2008, p.388). This form of communication is produced for its own sake, the point is that something, anything, has been written rather than what has been written. Whilst Miller, V. (2008) is somewhat pessimistic about this form of communication, in modern societies where face to face communication with family and friends becomes increasingly difficult, and indeed time to construct other meaningful interactions, phatic culture and the act of ‘keeping in touch’, in the context of this thesis, certainly has its role to play in maintaining relationships and therefore our identity. Losing touch with particular groups or individuals may also result in

losing a particular part of ourselves; the creation of distance between people does not equate to the meaning of the relationship felt by those involved being diminished.

It is reasonable to suggest then that even the most banal interaction which occurs on Facebook will constitute some level of meaning. What has been neglected here however is the notion that text based communication might also have a negative impact on a relationship should 'wrong' or hateful words be written, or simply too much, what might be seen as flippant by one might not be so to another. Here again Facebook as a social space with multiple audiences simultaneously present becomes important for impression management. With varying impressions of self and identities to manage complications may arise not even from the content of the message but the fact an exchange has occurred – perhaps one of the most easily associable examples being that of an ex-partner. Such may be exacerbated, as mentioned previously, where the individual harbours an identity which would generally be deemed deviant. If an other whose stigmatised identity is known about (Goffman, 1963) is seen to be engaging with the individual on somewhat friendly terms, then audiences may begin to question why this is so. As stated previously, an individual's attempt to pass or cover their identity may be thwarted by the post of another on their profile, however also the mere presence of a particular audience may lead to the unintentional and unwanted revelation of the problematic identity.

## **RESEARCH AND BLURRED DEFINITIONS**

There has been relatively little empirical research conducted on friendship with a sociological focus and much work still tends to be theoretical, although aided by the rise of the Internet and mobile communication technology which allow an instant, tangible and broad way of observing friendship in action this is changing. Research that has been conducted is predominantly through content or discourse analysis of text that displays friendship or references to it – for example, diaries or yearbooks, and now text messages or wall posts. Theoretically however there is still a lack of consensus on what exactly friendship is, and what being a friend constitutes. Pahl (2002) notes that even psychologists who have given considerable significance to

friendship are unable to offer a definitive criterion (Pahl, 2002: 412). It is difficult to conduct research on a phenomenon which cannot be well defined, even within more qualitative work there needs to be some boundaries of definition.

Beyond academia, in everyday life there is ambiguity concerning what friendship is, what it means and who constitutes as a friend. Pahl and Spencer (2001) found that individuals often considered friends as family, and family as friends, blurring what may appear to be a fairly simple distinction to make (cited in Pahl, 2002: 413). Indeed the idea of being 'more' than a friend or 'more' than a family member has been heavily commercialised and is common place in everyday rhetoric, most notably within the card and gift sector with phrases and poems that liken family members to friends or vice versa.<sup>9</sup> The discussion of friends as family and family as friends has been a particularly common feature within research on sexuality and also gender with a tendency to suggest that such blending occurs more frequently within the close networks individuals who are homosexual and/or female, and amongst older individuals as well (for examples see: Candy et al, 1981; Chambers, 2002; Jordan-Marsh and Harden, 2005; Oswald, 2002 and Weinstock, 2000).

Facebook and other SNSs have more generally blurred the boundaries of what a friend is and created more complexities concerning the required obligations of a friendship. On Facebook contacts are grouped together under the heading 'friends' when in reality they will be constructed of family members, work colleagues, acquaintances, others who are not known in an offline environment, and finally friends as they may be more traditionally conceived. Initially, SNSs emphasized connections with friends in their website taglines, for example MySpace was "a place for friends" and Facebook "helps you connect and share with the people in your life". More recently the messages have been expanded somewhat, to be more encompassing of commercial and cultural influences, however at least in terms of Facebook ("Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook" Facebook, 2013) the onus remains on 'friends' and indeed perhaps more so with the specific use of the word friends in its most recent tagline. Despite this, Facebook allows for distinction to be made between contacts, acknowledging therefore that although labelled as friends as a

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Susabelle Boutique (2013) and Waldo Pancake (2011).

whole they may not fit this definition in reality. If an individual chooses they may publically identify their romantic relationship with another, and also who in their contacts are members of their family, company and work networks can be added and privately the individual can group their friends list into multiple categories of their choosing. The popular notion and act of having a Facebook friend cull also suggests that contacts are not always consistent with more typical notions of what a friend is, due to the disposable nature of some contacts<sup>10</sup>.

Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) whilst researching privacy-enhancing behaviour found that 98.8% of their sample included 'strong tie audiences' in their Facebook networks which were defined as family members and best friends, importantly only 11.2% included the family on their profile, compared to 98.6% who included their best friends (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010, p.1558). These figures are only marginally higher than those who include 'weak tie audiences', being casual friends and acquaintances, which stands at 95.1% of the sample, but both figures are dramatically higher than the figures for the inclusion of 'outsider audiences' at 29.7% (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010, p.1558). Not only does this research illuminate the variance of relationships contained within an individual's network on Facebook, but also illustrates the importance of friendship connections over many others with nearly all participants including friends of both strong and weaker ties, yet often rejecting the inclusion of family members<sup>11</sup>. The number of individuals who included very weak associations, and perhaps some of the more casual friendships, gives some explanation to the Facebook cull - the abandonment of those connections which are of little meaning or use. Nevertheless the pertinence of friendship on Facebook is well illustrated here, as is the emphasis on connections that already exist in the offline opposed to Facebook as a tool for generating new connections and friendships.

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<sup>10</sup> Whilst academic work considers the reason for the impact of unfriending on an individual basis, there is little research into the phenomenon of mass 'culling', yet a simple Google search illustrates the popularity of this action. For example, see Huffington Post (2013).

<sup>11</sup> In part the lack of family members may be due to the sample which was made of American college students, often away from home for the first time and enjoying the freedom such brings with it that might not be suitable for parental or related other's eyes – in itself an instance of impression management.

However the online has been considered a space of opportunity for those with bodies which do not conform to what is considered 'normal' (for examples, see: Finn, 1999; Bothwell, 2011), and also more widely than this individuals are able to manipulate the physical representations of themselves to that deemed most desirable. These may not be radical alterations, but as with the text based construction of profiles images and photos may be selected, edited and deleted accordingly. Furthermore access to Internet communities which focus on shared experience of a particular life event have proven incredibly important due to the lack of support available to individuals in the offline (for examples, see: Eysenbach et al, 2004; Neal et al, 2007). In fact online environments have been identified as highly beneficial for any type of marginalised group, whether through discrimination or a rather more innocent lack of understanding (for examples, see: Mehra et al, 2004; Norris, 2004). The use and benefits of Facebook for such purposes are broadly inconclusive, however longitudinal research by Steinfield et al (2008) found that those with lower self-esteem received the most benefits from being on Facebook and interacting with their social network in the absence of lacking the confidence and social skills to do so offline. What remains unclear however is to what extent the effects of these online based communications last and if they are advantageous for building friendships in the offline?

Although the figures vary, of the individuals that use the Internet to form new friendships around half will go on to meet face to face and move the friendship into the offline (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2007; Wolak et al, 2003). This suggests that friendships formed online can be meaningful and durable, whilst also confirming that face to face contact is still important for individuals and their interpersonal relationships and friendships. In turn this adds to the argument that individuals will use SNSs such as Facebook as an aid to furthering their relationships offline, rather than replacing them. However it also begs the question as to why the other half of those who meet online do not either seek or manage to extend the relationship into the offline.

To summarise what has been drawn from the literature thus far, as stated by Giddens we are somewhat obsessed with our relationships with others, and having close, meaningful friendships is of paramount importance in any individual's history. Our most important performances, those which we believe in the most and those which seem most 'true' to ourselves are those that we perform to those we feel are closest to us, going far beyond Goffman's backstage quarters. Decisions concerning what and what not to display will

inevitably be based on the perceptions and expectations that those individuals have, as this is one of the main sources of gaining recognition and subsequently ontological security. However, our closeness to others is likely to be grounded in different aspects of our identities as relationships often begin within specialised contexts. These identities and roles may not be compatible, especially where stigmatised identities are concerned, and an individual must engage in techniques such as passing or covering in order to attempt to rectify this role conflict (Goffman, 1963). In a space such as Facebook where a wide variety of audiences are brought together impression management is not necessarily straight forward. The consequences of poor management are potentially made more acute where close friendships are involved, as the individual stands to lose something which is of considerable importance<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Yet in some situations loose associations will influence the self we present on SNSs, the criteria in these cases appears to be the impact that poor impression management will have on our lives. For example, where we have work colleagues and employers on our profiles, the presentation of a self which contradicts the impression expected in front of this audience can lead to unemployment, therefore having a significant negative effect on an individual's life.

## **WE NEED TO TALK: DISCLOSURE and the PURE RELATIONSHIP**

As considered briefly at the start of this chapter Giddens argues that as a consequence of the uncertainty and instability in contemporary Western societies, there has been a 'transformation of intimacy'. Stemming from his general theory of identity and reflexivity, Giddens argues that a new form of intimacy has emerged, that being the 'pure relationship'. The pure relationship is undertaken merely for its own sake, and will only remain so long as it is seen to be worth sustaining by each individual involved (Giddens, 1992: 58). It commands reciprocal respect and knowledge of the other through mutual self-disclosure and trust - the relationship is grounded on an equality of power and expression of the self (Giddens, 1992: 190). However research from the same decade that *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) was published tends to refute the emergence of such a transformation, and although there have been changes to social life as a whole, structural and physical constraints still limit individuals' interactions. Jamieson (1999) argues that the concept of a 'pure relationship' is an unobtainable ideal, at least not without a huge power and perception shift within the dominant institutions of society. In addition, it may not be equal disclosure that is essential for the maintenance of a relationship, but a *negotiated* level of disclosure that satisfies all involved, furthermore whilst a lack of disclosure may be problematic so too may over disclosure. The importance of the pure relationship for this thesis concerns the act of disclosure being a fundamental element of not just intimate relationships but also friendships and communication or 'talk' being a founding element of Facebook and the interaction between these.

### **THE PURE RELATIONSHIP**

The pure relationship is "a relationship of sexual and emotional equality, which is explosive in its connotations for pre-existing forms of gender power" (Giddens, 1992: 2). Its emergence is parallel to that of plastic or 'decentred' sexuality, which transforms sexuality into an essential part of an individual's personality and expression of the self, rather than simply a necessity for reproduction, supposedly freeing sexuality from

problems of exploitation and marginalisation. Love and sexuality once appeared together through marriage, however Giddens claims that they are now tied via the pure relationship, and marriage is conversely increasingly centred on this new form of intimacy (Giddens, 1992: 58). In this sense the pure relationship appears to answer the call for a change in view on strict monogamous relationships routed in traditional sanctions and stigmatisation, and also of the romanticised ideal of love (Comer, 1974: 219). The pure relationship is entered into for no other reason than its own sake - "for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992: 58). Each individual has to work at the relationship equally, or the relationship will break down. As such the pure relationship is inherently uncertain; it can be terminated at any time, and as previously suggested is 'until further notice' than 'until death do us part' (Giddens, 1992: 58). What is so significant about the pure relationship according to Giddens is that it is not limited to a single type of relationship and can be applied to all close relationships an individual engages in (Giddens, 1992: 58). However Giddens gives very little attention to any other relationship except romantic heterosexual relationships.

Giddens argues that the pure relationship is intrinsically tied with reflexivity and so is not ground in any external societal or cultural traditions and institutions (for example, monogamy or patriarchy). A pure relationship should never draw upon outside influences for its management and sustainment (Giddens, 1992: 90, 185). Trust as a "vesting of confidence in the other" and their ability to act with integrity, along with the relationship to withstand problems, does not have any external support (Giddens, 1992: 138). Instead trust is based in the intimacy of the relationship, which is in turn defined by the amount of self-disclosure which occurs between the individuals involved. This disclosure must be equal or the relationship will dissolve into co-dependency and become considerably harmful to both partners, although Giddens notes that strong dependency will only occur in certain adults due to childhood trauma (Giddens, 1992: 138-9). As part of acting with integrity, individuals are also expected to respect and appreciate the other's unique personality traits, qualities and desires, consequently this means taking account for any decisions made that involve and will thus effect the other in some way (Giddens, 1992: 186-7). In other words, each must respect and

*recognise* the other. In turn an “appeal [for change] may be made by either partner when situations arise felt to be unfair and oppressive” which, if the relationship truly is a pure relationship should be considered carefully and discussed until a solution is found (Giddens, 1992: 192). If a resolution cannot be found then the relationship will break down.

## **A QUESTION OF LIVED EXPERIENCE?**

Giddens fails to “distinguish the experiences of lived lives from views of how they should be lived” (Jamieson, 1999: 480). In other words, the pure relationship may be an ideal which couples aspire to, however this is not evidence that intimate relationships are actually organised and sustained in such a way. Further the argument could also be made that “relationships are unstable... in every culture and throughout every era of history” (Firestone and Catlett, 1999: 16). Relationships have always required ‘work’ and intimacy has always been a process, what has changed is the moral obligation and expectation of individuals to remain in relationships despite a lack of intimacy. Dissolution in non-romantic relationships, that is friendships, may be more to do with practical reasons, such as moving away and minimal free time resulting in a lack of communication and maintaining disclosure. As stated above Facebook, and other SNSs, can manifest as a way of maintaining relationships, preventing a sense of loss and loneliness, and eliminate to a significant extent the need to ‘catch up’ when infrequent face to face interactions do occur. Catching up has been identified as diminishing the quality of relationships and face to face interaction by forcing individuals to articulate as much information as they can into a small amount of time rather than constructing a meaningful narrative (Wittel, 2001). Facebook allows individuals to keep up to date with the day to day events happening in their friend’s lives, through various types of updates allowing freedom to speak more intimately about the events in their lives when they are able to see each other face to face<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Miller (2011) argues that Facebook makes maintaining friendships “more efficient” as individuals are able to “research” prospective friends and partners and also Facebook negates the need for people to travel and see each other in person. Miller, D. (2011) completely fails to acknowledge the benefits in taking time to ‘get to know’ someone and perhaps more importantly in the value of face to face interaction – chatting online can in no way appropriate actually being with friends and

Although the application of the pure relationship to 'real life' is somewhat questionable, disclosure most certainly seems to be a fundamental feature in modern relationships, and this is emphasized also in the literature on friendship in the value of communication, even in its rudimentary forms. However as eluded to above what may be of more influence in the continuation of a relationship is a negotiated level of disclosure as opposed to necessarily equal disclosure, if only due to the number of relationships that continue successfully without a balance of disclosure. Jamieson (1999 and 2004) discusses the negotiation that occurs within relationships more generally in her critique of Giddens and wider arguments. However there does not appear to be any literature that considers rather than merely 'putting up' with an imbalance of disclosure and finding alternative sources to either disclose or indeed not disclose to, that individuals enter a mutual understanding of each other's differing needs for disclosure in terms of both quantity and the content of disclosure. It seems logical that *recognising* the other person as an individual by acknowledging their disclosure needs would provide more solid ground for trust and therefore ontological security than an assumed equality of disclosure, and in turn grant the individual a stronger sense of self. Recognition then comes as a part of the process and as a result of disclosure: firstly from a mutual respect and understanding of that which is wished to be disclosed, and secondly from appreciation of the information, the self that is presented, from the disclosure itself.

Disruption in a relationship stemming from disclosure in this case is potentially due to a disruption in recognition through a deviation from the negotiated level of disclosure or the failure to disclose that which has been expected. Facebook offers an environment where such imbalances in the negotiated level of disclosure may come to light more easily, given the number of different audiences present with certain expectations of the individual. To return to an example used before, perhaps the failure to disclose that one is still in touch

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loved ones and to suggest that it can is somewhat ridiculous. Later in the works Miller, D. (2011) states that his participants argue "quite plausibly" that "interaction with someone on Facebook is not a substitute for seeing them face to face" (Miller, D., 2011, p.183-4). There are a number of occasions where Miller, D. (2011) presents contrasting statements or as a result of failing to engage properly with the existing literature makes claims that are completely out of sync with current knowledge, at one point he even states that he has "very limited" evidence for what is being discussed but continues to discuss it anyway (Miller, D., 2011, p.177). There are some interesting case studies and on occasion some insightful analysis, however there is a distinct lack of academic rigour to the work and it is a difficult read at points due to this. Given the length of time invested in the ethnography it is bewildering that Miller, D. (2011) produced such a lackadaisical analysis and publication.

with one's ex-partner. The notion of recognition has been mentioned several times during this review and detail concerning the process of recognition will be examined in next before the conclusion of the literature review.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT ME: THE POWER OF RECOGNITION IN IDENTITY

It has been alluded to so far that our performances, that is, the different roles we play, the different identities we express, do not sit linearly, so that some roles will be given preference and assigned more importance than others which McCall and Simmons (1978) have labelled a plastic hierarchy of prominence. There are two main factors relevant here that contribute to the prominence a particular role is assigned. First, is the extent to which the individual is actually representative of the role he or she is performing; “[t]hose identities that, from our egocentric perspectives, we more nearly manage to live up to are, in their rarity, very dear to our hearts” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 75)<sup>14</sup>. Second, “is the degree to which one’s view of self has been supported by relevant alters... people whose evaluations and appraisals of this role could be expected to count” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 75). In other words, the degree to which we gain recognition in a particular role from meaningful others will affect the prominence we assign to that role, and consequently the frequency and conviction in which we perform that role.

On Facebook, the process of recognition is made more tangible through, for example, a photo or status comment or the acceptance of a friend request and other gestures which can be witnessed not only by those in receipt or initiation of them but by any others permitted to do so. Individuals can potentially monitor and record the actions and behaviours they receive recognition for with greater ease on Facebook where it can be ‘seen’ than in the offline. With the relatively simple malleability of Facebook profiles the identity presented can be reflexively altered in consistency with the recognition individuals received, bearing in mind that the identity presented on Facebook will be constructed of those identities already given prominence in the offline world therefore any recognition given will reaffirm that given offline and thus their prominence.

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<sup>14</sup> Potentially this will make them a priority within the self to be presented on Facebook, although this is of course contingent on the compatibility of these with multiple audiences, there may be an element of self which although is considered to in fact be quite fundamental in terms of ‘who’ a person is, it may be either too dangerous, taboo or risky to display to multiple audiences. Again Goffman’s (1963) spoiled identity and the means by which an individual negotiates its existence is pertinent here.

## WHAT IS RECOGNITION?

Recognition literature is often based on more formal associations, achievements and contexts, however we also need recognition for those informal and personal identities that are as McCall and Simmons argue more close to our hearts, and that is required for the development of ontological security. Not receiving recognition, through respect, affirmation, even cultural capital, will have a significantly damaging impact on an individual's sense of self and therefore esteem. Esteem, closely associated with recognition, is another area marginalised within sociological theory as a driving force for behaviour or action. Instead the market, consumerism, the state and their derivatives are used to illustrate why individuals behave or act in a particular way. Yet "[we] seek esteem or shrink from disesteem among people we are very unlikely to meet again; we even seek esteem or shrink from disesteem among those who will live after our time and whom we will never meet", it is a significant element in all of our lives (Brennan and Pettit, 2004: 4). Certainly the pursuits of academia are representative of this yearning for recognition: from life as a PhD student in constant search of approval from one's supervisor, to possible employers, appearances at conferences (even when not presenting a paper) to the academic collective in one's field more broadly.

Recognition is often an intangible phenomenon, meaning it is difficult to accurately define or illustrate within the known dimensions of society and social life. It is difficult to capture any specific case where we can 'see' recognition at work, with perhaps the exception of Facebook and similar online forums (Brennan and Pettit, 2004; Heinich, 2009). However, "intangibility does not mean ineffectiveness: we all know the deep affective consequences of the way we perceive our own image in the eyes of others, however it is symbolized... recognition has strong effects on personal identity, on the need to be reassured about one's capacities, and on self confidence" (Heinich, 2009: 87, 102-203). Simply because something appears for most of the time as an intangible object, does not mean we should neglect the pursuit of its study. Further aiding the disregard of recognition is its direct relation to esteem and the presumption of esteem as a purely cognitive entity, rendering recognition to be deemed as a matter for social psychology. Yet, "[f]eelings, as well as values and representations of all kinds, are just as much a part of social life, and thus they belong to the field of

sociological insight on the same grounds... as 'factuality'" (Heinich, 2009: 87). Recognition must be explored in a sociological context as the implications and effects of it are entirely real for our negotiation through the social world and our interactions and relationships with others<sup>15</sup>. Recognition is an important aspect of everyday life, it is a largely internal process, and hence its intangibility, but it is consistently engaged with by individuals. As stated above, the pursuit of recognition guides our actions and behaviours, from actively seeking it, complying with disesteem involving feelings of rejection and hopelessness or where it is given striving for its continuance.

All individuals engage with role identities, which are legitimised through role performances and maintained with role support (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Role support is almost directly linked to recognition. McCall and Simmons (1978: 71) state that role support is "a set of reactions and performances by others expressive implications of which tend to confirm one's detailed and imaginative view of himself as an occupant of a position", in which esteem, prestige and approval are a significant part. Further, there will always be some audiences whose reverence and respect will be more sought after than others, "[a]ll kinds of people serve as audiences to one's performances and perhaps accord role support in varying degrees, but their reactions are not given equal weight..." (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 71). Role support is complicated further in that it is not a constant, given or stable element in identity formation and construction, and therefore recognition too is none of these things. As a result individuals are forced to constantly reaffirm their selves, "An ample quantity of support today is no longer available tomorrow... One quickly forgets his admiration and acclaim of another, who is therefore forced to impress us all over again" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 72). The reasons for this are that past performances cannot be taken as an indicator of future success, the fickle nature of human beings revering and chastising in the same breath, and the fallacy of memory of others' behaviours and actions (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 72). The quest for recognition, is a perpetual and continual one.

In addition to considering the objects of recognition (behaviour or actions), the instruments of recognition (respect, esteem, prestige), "social scientists have to focus on the identity of those who grant recognition [the

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<sup>15</sup> The arguments made in defence of this are the same as those made in the previous discussion of the notion of a centred self.

mediators], because the quality of the recognition depends on the quality of those who grant it” (Heinich, 2009: 90)<sup>16</sup>. On Facebook the quality of the mediator can largely be judged in terms of the strength of the tie between the individual receiving the recognition and who is giving the recognition. It is not unreasonable to argue that receiving feedback on a status update from a loose association will have less than impact than receiving it from someone considered to be a close friend. Heinich argues “among the various kinds of mediators, small numbers... are much more powerful in influencing assessments of quality in recognition processes than crowds of admirers” (Heinich, 2009: 91). Therefore no matter how many contacts appear in an individual’s friends list the meaningful recognition received will not be dissimilar, assuming that within their friends lists there are a similar number of close or strong ties<sup>17</sup>.

Serial adding of friends potentially occurs as a result of a two-fold process. Firstly, due to those on a friend’s list being a visual indicator of an individual’s identity – a Goth, for example, may wish to have many other Goths on their friend’s list as affirmation of the fact that they are Goth. In this case the strength of the tie is irrelevant as the connection is a direct mediation of the identity, used to reinforce the identity to others. Secondly, weak associations may still provide recognition, only it will be diluted in meaning and longevity and so having more friends increases the potential of gaining at least some recognition. McCall and Simmons give credence to this idea:

“...when the opportunity structure is exceedingly limited or when the content of the identity is more idiosyncratic... it is far more difficult for the person to find satisfactory role partners, and anyone who is minimally adequate is likely to be treasured... Sometimes people become so starved for audiences who will help to confer role-support [recognition] upon some of their more esoteric but treasured

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Heinich discusses recognition in terms of vocational prizes within artistic and scientific activities, however much of what is said can be used when speaking of recognition more generally and with the specific case of SNS.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Robin Dunbar (2009) suggests that we have a finite number of approximately 150 individuals we can successfully maintain contact and interact with at any one point in our lives, so any individual with more than 150 friend on their SNS with arguably not be utilising all of them at any one point (Dunbar in BBC, 2009).

identities that they set up what amount to reciprocal trade agreements in over-evaluation" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 99-100).

Indeed on Facebook individuals tend to have high numbers of contacts, with a reported average of 130 friends per user (StatisticsBrain, 2013). Whilst this may not seem especially large in comparison to the number of people an individual will know throughout the course of their life, this is an unusually large number of contacts to have in a single space. Conversely, 18-24 year olds have the highest number of average friends on Facebook, shortly ahead of 12-17 year olds, compared to those over 25 (Marketing Charts, 2013)<sup>18</sup>. This indicates that the number of Facebook contacts does not necessarily run concurrent with the number of individuals that are known or have been known in real life. What this may allude to is post 25 year olds having more established grounds for ontological security negating the need to seek alternative sources of recognition on Facebook. Online support groups have been identified as vital to individuals with health problems where adequate support or understanding has not been received in the offline (for examples see: Bothwell, 2011; Eysenbach et al, 2004; Finn, 1999), this combined with the statement by McCall and Simmons above, leads to the suggestion that where the offline fails to provide suitable recognition that an individual may derive adequate levels of self-esteem and ontological security from it, the individual will turn to the online in order to attempt to acquire them. As mentioned previously, this may be particularly relevant for identities that are considered taboo or deviant and are therefore less likely to be recognised to a satisfactory level in offline spheres by others who are high in our hierarchy of recognition. In turn, once again this only exacerbates the question of how individuals manage their identity on Facebook with multiple audiences present.

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<sup>18</sup> This is based on the American population, therefore the averages reported here are likely to be much higher than those for all Facebook users.

## CLAIMING RECOGNITION

There are two primary strategies in which individuals will attempt to claim recognition from each other. The first is based on the performance of an identity itself involving “an unspoken agreement among the parties present that each will serve as a reasonably cooperative but more or less honest audience for the other”, providing the necessary recognition based on the assessment of the performance (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 149). The second method involves direct negotiation for role support of an individual’s more vulnerable identities, and is found in both very close and very distant relationships. Within a close tie individuals are likely to “...come to expect each almost automatically to support the other’s performances and claims... simply as his due for participation in such a solidary unit” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 150). Within a weak tie knowing the interaction will be somewhat meaningless leads to the “suspension of critical evaluation of each other” allowing the individuals “to gain a fleeting modicum of support for their starving role identities” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 150). Again this contributes to the reasons as to why individuals may interact with others they do not know on Facebook, not only is there a large stock of strangers available, but also there is the protection of the screen which is not available in the offline. Equally, it makes sense for individuals to have those whom they are close to on their online networks – it seems sensible for the individual to have as many people as is feasible who are almost guaranteed to provide recognition to inhabit the same space as they do. In most cases claims to be recognised involve both of these strategies in order to give the best assurance that some recognition and role support will take place (McCall and Simmons, 1978).

Finally, it is important to note that when assessing the successfulness of claims to be recognised, and the quality of the recognition given, that:

“...the objective role-performance itself is not the important thing; rather it is the *perceived discrepancy* between the performance and one’s ideal image (or role-identity) that forms the basis of one’s judgement of success or failure in the performance” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 87).

Taylor (1994) argues that it is the politics of modern society which has created the conditions in which claims to be recognised are likely to fail, that is, where our expectations for recognition and the actualities of this are inconsistent. McCall and Simmons (1978) also argue that where hoped for recognition and actual recognition are matched in terms of a particular identity, then the immediate need for further recognition does not increase. Yet where there is some discrepancy between the hoped for and actual, whether this is more or less, recognition, the need for further recognition increases. This relationship is intensified the greater the differences between the recognition given and that desired:

“...rewards that greatly exceed the kinds and amounts desired in the situation greatly increase the immediate desire for further such rewards. Obtained support *far below* the level desired in the situation, on the other hand, brings about a very sharp drop in the immediate desire for rewards” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 86).

Where the claim to be recognised appears to have failed to an equal extreme, the individual is met with feelings of misery and anguish, “[b]eing actors, we are consciously or unconsciously seeking recognition, and failure to win this is, at the very least, a depressing, often heartbreaking, experience” (Park, 1927, p. 739). In extreme cases where these emotions do not subside, suicide may become the only perceivable option by the individual (McCall and Simmons, 1978). The arguments here are not dissimilar to those proposed with the negotiation of disclosure, which was also linked to recognition at the time.

Recognition is fundamental to our sense of who we are, our interactions with others and even our own psychological and physical wellbeing, in some cases to the point that it becomes a matter of life or death. Recognition then, and its effects, simply cannot be ignored, and indeed becomes even more paramount where vulnerable identities (those that cannot be easily played out) are concerned. The choice to seek recognition on Facebook may be due to an individual’s desire to continue and maintain the recognition they receive offline, where the audiences are at least similar and there are individuals within them who are known to give the recognition desired. Where online and offline realms are in contemporary society so interlinked, this is a logical choice to make, however it is also logical to seek recognition online where it is not being

fulfilled offline. Of interest is what, if anything, changes where a perceived taboo or deviant identity is involved, and in turn what the differences are in the presentation and management of that identity between those who have found a source of security through others in the offline compared to those who have not. In essence, this will reveal if the forms of information control and management individuals with spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963) engage with offline are similarly replicated online and what contingents are involved with this.

## **SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND IDENTITY**

### **A BRIEF BACKGROUND**

By 2004 the popularity of SNSs had superseded that of all other social and communication orientated platforms on the Internet<sup>19</sup>. The importance of their dominance being that such sites, Bebo, MySpace and now Facebook, reversed the narrative/network situation of the blog – the previously most popular socially orientated format. With blogs (for example LiveJournal, one of the most successful blogging sites) precedence was given to the narrative provided by the individual illustrating their life and self over time in somewhat rich description. Whilst there is a social element to blogs, generally the individual's profile and their contacts are inconsequential to the content of the blog itself. With the onset of SNSs the reverse was apparent, the opportunity for thick description was largely removed and instead the profile became dominant, allowing an almost instant knowledge of the individual. Profiles also tend to include a clear display of an individual's network through the provision of clickable icons (displaying the relevant user's profile photo) which when pressed will take the voyeur to that individual's profile. The importance of an individual's social network is also emphasized with the ability to 'tag' others in nearly all other content. Individuals' profiles on Facebook are often orientated around offline friends and contacts, that is, pre-existing relationships, with the activities an individual engages in with these contacts represented by photographs, tags and increasingly GPS mapping (Ellison et al, 2007). Indeed the use of images on SNSs have become one of their most important features, and the act of tagging and sharing photos with one's network has become an important part of friendship maintenance as well as a tool for identity expression (Ames and Naaman, 2007 and Holmes, 2012). In terms of text based content the user input elements on SNSs are generally very minimal, and are not often in narrative form, in the traditional sense of having a clear beginning, middle and end, and being chronologically arranged.

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description of the history of the Internet and identity see Miller, V. (2011).

With the emergence of SNS also came a rethinking of the manner in which the self is performed online. Those such as Turkle (1996) favoured a more post-modernist perspective of fragmented identities (denying the presence of a 'core' self) and this appeared to make sense given the structure of the Internet and those who used it at the time<sup>20</sup>. MUD users were a relatively minute proportion of the world's population, they tended to be male (who Farnham and Churchill (2011) found to often have more faceted identities in general), middle class, and had a specific interest in technology and gaming (Robinson, 2007). The population of the Internet is now far more reflective of the general offline population (notwithstanding the digital divides still very much present), and their interests are considerably different and more diverse than role playing games. Robinson (2007) argues that "...in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves. Rather users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world" (Robinson, 2007, p.94). However this being so also means that individuals will bring with them the 'baggage' of their bodies and selves from the offline. For the stigmatised individual then it might be considered that whilst the Internet offers a place of potential support (as discussed above) and exploration, it does not offer any escape from the problematic self. In this case then the question can be begged of what do individuals with a stigmatising identity 'do' with it on Facebook, given the environment's emphasis on the simultaneous presence of multiple audiences.

Zhao et al (2008) also consider the construction of identity in online environments such as Facebook where anonymity is generally forgone in order to incorporate offline networks and associations. They identified three methods of identity construction on Facebook which represented a shift towards implicit statements of identity, contrasted with the rather more explicit ones found in anonymous environments. The most implicit and most frequent form of self presentation identified was the visual self, represented by the plethora of photos an individual and their contacts chose to upload, and Zhao et al (2008) primarily identified this self as

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<sup>20</sup> Robinson (2007) argues that there is some uncertainty about the extent to which MUD users truly represented a break from their 'real' offline selves, and that some of the conclusions made may have had more to do with the utopian like rhetoric that surrounded the Internet at the time. In particular Robinson (2007) identifies that many of the avatars users created were created in the image of the offline self, users played out extreme versions of identities in the online in order to make sense of the offline.

the social self: essentially what the individual had been doing and whom they had been doing it with. The second most common presentation of self was the 'cultural self' whereby "Facebook users engage in enumerative cultural self-description when they simply list a set of cultural preferences that they think define them" (Zhao et al, 2008, p.1825). Finally the least engaged with presentation of self were the direct descriptions of the self, usually contained within 'about me' sections of profiles where users are given the freedom to construct their own narrative.

With the introduction of the Timeline on Facebook (launched in September, 2011 and enforced in March 2012), this has partially altered, whilst text is still fairly minimal all of the individual's activities are now chronologically ordered on the main 'page' of their profile, starting from the year of their birth and moving through to the present day (Mashable, 2012 and Pom8, 2012). Users may click on a year, and any month within that year to see what the individual was doing at the time – events attended, photos uploaded, tags, things they 'liked' and so on. This creates something that is more narrative in form and encapsulates the individual as a whole, rather than dividing their identity into clearly designated sections. The more linear forms of profile construction are still present, however these are now somewhat superseded by the Timeline and have been obscured so that the individual must select a particular tag to display 'information' about another individual. The Timeline is a much more dynamic form of 'viewing' the individual and forces a focus on the recent activities and words of the individual as an illustration of their self and also of their social network (Zdanow and Wright, 2013). The Timeline is much more in line with a progressive and reflexive account of identity than the traditional profile, and could even be likened to the egocentric maps that individual's navigate as described by Ismael (2007). The visual and social, the cultural and the written self appear collectively in a transitional and dynamic space, almost making the self on Facebook an entirely implicit one, even more so when Miller's (2008) arguments towards phatic communication are considered.

What is also of great importance for the transition to Timeline on Facebook is that it integrates content posted by others that the individual has been tagged or otherwise linked to, and not only as it was direct wall posts. Therefore every time an individual makes a post on Facebook as a statement of their own self, implicit as it

may be, through tagging others in that content they are simultaneously contributing to and affirming those others' presentations of self as well. Again, Ismael's (2007) egocentric maps seem appropriate here, with the self being mapped in relation to an individual's networks of friends, images and consumer preferences, all from within a single point in cyberspace. With this integration of content, navigating the self on Facebook requires the individual to situate themselves not only amongst their own meanderings, but by proxy the ambling adventures of their social network.

## **THE NATURE OF THE ONLINE SELF**

Van den Berg (2009) considers the notion of the situated self in terms of mobile communication technologies, arguing that the self, constructed and maintained through a variety of fixed and mobile technology, is becoming mapped through a 'distributed presence'. This means that an individual is likely to be engaged with multiple selves simultaneously, switching frequently between the different frames or performances and therefore complicating the definition of parameters of a situation (Goffman, 1959). This idea seems somewhat closely related to Turkle's discussion of 'windows':

"...in the daily practice of many users, windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system. The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times. The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time." (Turkle, 1996, p.14).

When the individual is placed in a situation where they are faced with multiple audiences, it is argued that they participate in different performances simultaneously to satisfy each of the audiences in front of them, that the self essentially becomes fractured. Performing in this way "necessitates only a stylised and truncated enactment of each role", as an actor does not have the space to give their usual dedication to any one performance (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 160). Furthermore there is a finite limit to the number of

simultaneous roles an individual may perform, if for no other reason than the amount of stimulus the human brain can endure at any given time.

However, the panoptical stylizing of Facebook seems to push individuals towards presenting a single consistent self which represents them across a variety “and sometimes incompatible” contexts and series of relationships (Miller, V., 2011, p.172). The individual is not always present on Facebook in order to perform separate presentations of self, yet their profile is most certainly omnipresent as are to a certain extent their audiences, a question is raised as to the possibility of having a distributed presence on Facebook without maintaining a profile for each relevant self. Zhao et al (2008) make the claim that Facebook privacy settings allow individuals to keep multiple audiences separate and maintain their impression management as is done in the offline, however this fails to take account of the distinctions between any audiences except those ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage in a traditional Goffman sense. Managing the subtle and complex nuances between different interpersonal and close tied audiences through privacy settings would potentially require near constant management, and indeed the introduction of the Timeline will have made this process more difficult. It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that the opposite of fragmentation occurs, meaning that the individual’s identity becomes centred through a *blending* of roles and contexts (Miller, V., 2011). In order to engage with multiple audiences, rather than switch between different ‘windows’ or selves, the individual could instead present a central individual that is recognised by all audiences, and in addition does not exclude any group. This self would be the re-centred self as described earlier during the discussion of reflexivity and although the management of such a self is not without potential problems it does allow some respite for the individual in terms of maintaining the general content on their profile.

## **WHO ARE YOU? POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF THE ONLINE SELF**

However, the notion of the Facebook self being stylised and truncated is still relevant despite the shift from a disjointed to a single self. If it exists, the re-centred self is in essence a compromised self, one that will not

be wholly recognised by any one of an individual's audiences. The re-centred self is a combination of the most amenable and compatible elements of the individual's identity repertoire as well as any characteristics that consistently run through their performances. This, technically, allows the dissemination of the re-centred self amongst a variety of audiences, with the intention of avoiding disruption to any relationships and in turn maintaining the desired level of recognition for each identity in its fractured (offline) form. However as has been seen with the discussion of Goffman (1963) and stigma, poor impression management where the individual misjudges the compatibility or the extent to which a statement of self will be accepted could have potentially severe consequences. There are numerous examples in the media where individuals have encountered employment loss, relationship breakdown or even been arrested due to an unfavourable post made on a SNS (Miller, D. (2011) documented various examples of these in his ethnographic work on Facebook in Trinidad). Poor management of the self online can significantly affect an individual's life, and in some cases alter their whole life course.

Perhaps less dramatically, is the question of whether a compromised self also leads to a compromised recognition, and this is a potential problem for both a distributed or re-centred presentation of self. If one only sees an individual within a specific context on a fairly regular basis then it is reasonable to assume that element of self to be a significant feature of their identity. This may not be a particularly explicit or conscious process, but where recognition is concerned there are important implications. If an individual is perpetuating a compromised self, that introduces elements that were previously not known about (Goffman, 1963) or removes others deemed important by certain audiences, the reciprocity of recognition becomes unstable. It is reasonable that in the first instance challenges to an audience's perception of an individual may be overlooked, one "may explain away the incongruous data as resulting from factors like temporary mood or unusual circumstances" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 118). Goffman (1971) argues that the individual upon making an error in their performance may engage with "remedial interchanges" in order to repair any damage that has been done. In minor misdemeanours individuals can redirect others' focus elsewhere and distract them from what has occurred (Goffman, 1971). In more serious cases that cannot simply be ignored or explained away the individual may salvage the performance by providing their audience with some form of

compensation for what has happened, such as an apology, and so long as this compensation is accepted the performance may be repaired and the self be restored (Goffman, 1971).

However this cannot be sustained on a long term basis where the discrepant information is presented on a repeated basis. "In general, the greater breadth and the duration of our experiences with alter, the more accurate our images of him become", however all relationships will be based on a mixture of truth and error due to the complex nature of identity (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 117). As Ismael argues, "[t]he emotional and psychological complexity built up over a history of reflective experience is so highly individual that it makes us penetrable only to those who have known us for some time, and only, for the most part, at a relatively shallow level" (Ismael, 2007: 209-10). Yet even if unconsciously we might consider that the identity presented to us by an individual is not necessarily accurate, being forced to confront it as a reality and acknowledge that our understanding of an individual is at best incomplete and at worst a fallacy is qualitatively different. The nature of the self presented on Facebook, in its re-centred or de-centred form, means that it has the ability to exacerbate and make visible what may have otherwise remained hidden, or in the converse hide that which is usually explicit.

Once again this becomes particularly pertinent where an individual is attempting to manage a taboo or deviant identity alongside others that are not so. Goffman (1963) has highlighted the extent to which the disclosure of discrediting information (here being the potentially problematic identity) to an audience can tarnish or spoil the self typically associated with the individual. Where the challenges to the perception of an individual are more substantial, they are more difficult to ignore, however they may still be rationalised in hindsight as explainable and perhaps crucially forgivable if the appropriate repair work is undertaken (Goffman, 1971). As Giddens (1992) observed, in intimate relationships the disclosure of sexual indiscretions with others outside of the relationship frequently did not result in the end of the relationship, instead they were rationalised and ultimately forgiven. However there are a finite number of indiscretions an individual can be tarnished with before the legitimacy of a performance is outrightly rejected.

## FOR THE GOOD OF FACEBOOK: MAINTAINING SOCIALITY IN A MODERN WORLD

As has been established, identity is intrinsically influenced by who we interact with in a variety of different ways, however who we interact with is inhibited by social and physical constraints and so “[w]e choose then, not the best of all possible interaction partners, but the best of the *available* interaction partners” (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 18). Of particular interest here is the hindrance created by geographical location, which effects relationships in a two-fold process, firstly in the initial formation of a relationship and secondly through the creation of distance given the higher rates of physical mobility engaged with in a modern world. It seems that despite the vast expanse of the Internet and what Castells (2004) would refer to as the space of flows and timeless time with it, an individual’s relationships and associations with others are geographically determined. By which it is meant that their development is pre-empted by the individuals sharing some physical space, be this the same residential area, place of employment or educational institution and so on. New communication technologies have presented an opportunity to transcend space and time on a global scale, but with respect to the formation of close and meaningful relationships geography remains to be a highly influential factor (Mok et al, 2010 and Holmes, 2012). Indeed the fact that individual’s predominantly elect to have their offline audiences make their social networks on Facebook, an online social platform with access to literally billions of people, is telling of this and as Lanier (2011) states: “...online culture is fixated on the world as it was before the web was born” (Lanier, 2011, p.123).

In societies of heightened physical mobility and limited scope for face to face interaction Facebook allows the continued maintenance of important relationships through sustained interaction when the location or physical space in which they existed is vacated by the individual (Holmes, 2012). Without online and mobile communications the potential for treasured and meaningful relationships to erode is dramatically increased, and given the strong association between an individual’s sense of self and their association this loss is likely to be of considerable detriment (particularly for the individual, but also for those left behind). Of course in any situation individual’s inevitably cease mourning and move on with their lives, and undoubtedly new meaningful connections will be made, however the use of Facebook and similar devices may aid to limit the

loneliness and confusion during such a transition. Although not the same nor potentially as effective as face to face interaction, the ability to maintain communication, even if it is largely phatic potentially assists in retaining a meaningful sense of self, belonging and a level of ontological security for a sufficient time so that the individual can 'settle' into their new environment.

However through the continuation of friendships and relationships, the identities and selves associated with them are also given a continued presence (Holmes, 2012). Whilst initially beneficial, as time passes these identities may limit the extent to which the individual is able to 'move on' with their lives as the past, is still very much a part of the present. "[F]riendships that may have stayed snugly in memory as dim high school recollections may now enjoy a repartee online..." and these renewed or continued relationships and their respective identities will inevitably have differing effects dependent on their compatibility with more current forms of self (Holmes, 2012, p.310). DiMicco and Millen (2007) explored how individuals negotiated the presence of past social groups from school and college and current work colleagues on Facebook. Their findings suggested that there were difficulties for participants in maintaining a profile for both professional and non-professional use, and whilst some intentionally developed their profiles with careful use of privacy settings to accommodate both audiences, most did not do so. "[M]ultiple user profiles and multilevel access controls can help users manage their online identities, without unintended leakage between corporate and social personas", however for the majority doing so required too much effort due to often quite cumbersome privacy controls (DiMicco, 2007, p.386).

Whilst it must be conceded that any addition of another identity to negotiate can only serve to complicate an individual's online identity management, it is evident again that for those with problematic and stigmatised identities Facebook becomes a complex and potentially dangerous environment to negotiate. Farnham and Churchill (2011), perhaps unsurprisingly, found that the more faceted (meaning distinct and separated) an individual's identities were, and the more incompatible these different components were, then the more anxious individuals were about sharing online and participating in social networking sites. They argue that individuals who "engage in counter-normative or stigmatised behaviors... most need identity segmentation

and tools for focused sharing” (Farnham and Churchill, 2011, p.367)<sup>21</sup>. Conversely however, they also found that those with more faceted identities had a significantly increased use of social technology in comparison to those with more integrated identities, with the suggestion that this was due to having to cater for their varying audiences separately (Farnham and Churchill, 2011).

Lampinen et al (2009) report a quite different story to both DiMicco (2007) and Farnham and Churchill (2011). Firstly, unlike DiMicco they found that users were quite active in managing their audiences and engaging with information control, they also identified two dominant types of Facebook user one of which appears to make quite sophisticated use of privacy controls<sup>22</sup>. Lampinen et al (2009) identify six strategies for managing the presence of multiple audiences on Facebook, that can be divided between behavioural and mental strategies. The first behavioural strategy was to separate the platform into distinct spaces and limit access to these contingent on which audience the individual belonged to, such a strategy “required continuous management of group identifications” and where the boundaries lay for each particular group (Lampinen et al, 2009, p.290). The second consists of “using suitable channels of communication”, a factor which DiMicco did in fact identify as being true of his own participants, individuals are it seems quite adept at being able to discern what method of communication a particular piece of information is appropriate for (Lampinen et al, 2009, p.281). Thirdly, is self-censorship and very simply if the individual thought the information was potentially discrediting or would otherwise create problems, they did not communicate it anywhere (at least not on Facebook).

The adjoining mental strategies “included both the creation of more inclusive in-group identities and the reciprocity of trusting other users and being responsible” (Lampinen et al, 2009, p.281). As a result of these strategies, unlike participants in Farnham and Churchill’s (2011) research, Lampinen et al (2009) found that individuals were relatively unbothered by the presence of multiple audiences and found this feature of Facebook largely unproblematic. Any tensions that did arise were attributed to particular individuals, rather

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that Farnham and Churchill’s (2011) participant base was older than the USA average, and tended to use email for focused and more intimate sharing. A younger cohort are potentially more likely to utilise the tools made available to them on Facebook rather than email.

<sup>22</sup> Although it should be noted that half of the participant sample were employees of an IT company!

than a wider conflict between groups (Lampinen et al, 2009), however it is not clear if there were actually any groups present for individuals that would have been anticipated to come into conflict or at least not sit comfortably with each other.

Returning to the initial thought that Facebook enables the continuation of identities that would have otherwise been lost, Miller, D. (2011) in his exploration of Facebook use in Trinidad describes the particular case study of an aging doctor. A once highly active individual, he became ill and through this consigned to a wheelchair and housebound. Through Facebook the doctor was able to replicate “exactly the kinds of networking relationships that he had fostered before his illness” and moreover eliminate the cross-national boundaries that had once restricted him from sustaining certain friendships (Miller, D., 2011, p.32). Facebook then can enable the individual to retain a sense of self when life circumstances alter the ability to do so offline. Further to this the doctor found he was able to contribute as an equal on Facebook, as Miller, D. (2011) states, “it did not matter one jot that he was wheelchair-bound or that he could no longer be articulate through voice. None of his Facebook interlocutors were any the wiser about his health or physical faculties. Within the land of Facebook, he was just as mobile and as articulate as any of them” (Miller, D., 2011, p.33-4). On Facebook, the doctor could render his disabilities, his stigmatising elements, unobtrusive, so much so in fact that he could successfully engage in passing (Goffman, 1963).

## **ROLES, REFLEXIVITY AND RECOGNITION: A CONCILIATION?**

The aim of this chapter has been to explore the links between the reflexivity, role performance and impression management, the situated and possible re-centred self within the context of friendship, recognition and Facebook. An overall account has been provided of identity and our relations with others in modern society, and the complications and questions raised with the Internet and in this specific case Facebook. In order to connect some of the main points discussed above more closely, a return is needed to the self that sits at the top of the prominence hierarchy, the 'situational self'. Essentially, "[t]he individual tries to work into his actual performance those identities that are high in the order of salience and is less concerned with working in those that are low order" (McCall and Simmons, 1978: 82). It has been argued that the Joycean Machine does not simply take a random selection of identity factors in order to create a centred self, the process is, whether conscious or unconscious, one of structure and meaning. Given that recognition is such a fundamental aspect of our identities, and indeed, our general well-being, it is reasonable to argue that part of the selection process in the Joycean Machine is based upon the quantity and quality of recognition we receive for different performances and their related identities. We perform a variety of roles to a variety of audiences in our everyday lives whom are determined somewhat, although not exclusively, by social and structural constraints (geography, class, gender and so on), we move through a reflexive process of disclosure in order to establish relationships with others (as collectives and communities as well as individuals) which involves an assessment on the success or failure to gain recognition during this process. Should someone fail to give recognition to us on an aspects of self we already deem to be important to us we are unlikely to establish a close relationship with them, as stated above, recognition is an expected element of friendship. Affirmation of a role or identity through the development of multiple relationships associated with it and in turn the recognition received from these associations and friendships, will lead to the individual ascribing prominence to them or at least reinforcing their existing position in the identity hierarchy. As a consequence these are likely to become part of our perceived centred self, and actual re-centred self on Facebook, due to their dominance in the mind of ours and others as being 'who we are'. Although obviously a simplified version of the chain of events that occur during these processes, it is sufficient to

illustrate the connections between individuals, their identities and others and give some explanation as to how certain selves come to gain more importance than others. The anticipated outcome of these processes, that is the hope of further and sustained recognition, leading to satisfactory levels of esteem and ontological security, is not guaranteed. The process is rife with complications and contradictions, and will inevitably individuals will have to 'work' at their identity, negotiating new information, audiences and contexts. Ultimately the individual is faced with a trade between being able to negotiate and make sense of their differing, and sometimes conflicting, roles, performances and identities and with maintaining the legitimization of these identities and fulfilling the fundamental human need to be recognised, and all whilst maintaining meaningful relationships which are valuable in and of themselves.

In the discussion of the importance of recognition for identity, we find that although we perform a variety of roles and identities in the course of our everyday lives, precedence is given to those for which we receive the most satisfactory level of recognition. This precedence, given time and investment through disclosure, and management through Dennett's Joycean Machine, brings us to a situated self – a re-centred self, whose purpose is to allow the individual to cope and to successfully live in a world that demands a variety of roles and performances of them. In a predominantly offline realm, this situated or re-centred self can be of significant use, it grounds the individual in the world in which they live, and it allows them to state 'this is me, and this is where I am' – like a red dot on a map.

However, Facebook provides an environment where an individual is actively encouraged to bring their varying and differing audiences into a single space, and therefore into 'hearing distance' of each other, presenting a unique quandary for individuals' day to day identity management. The individual could choose to engage with their various identities simultaneously, and where the selves are considered to be very similar to one another and careful selection of audiences and who within them are present this may be a reasonable option. However this is considerably risky as what may not appear inconsistent to the individual, having justified the contradictions of self throughout their life course, may appear to be so to audiences. One could also engage with a fragmented self as purported in early Internet theories and retain different profiles for different identities, therefore maintaining distance between the audiences as akin to the typical offline situation.

However this would involve a considerable amount of work and also would be unlikely to be considered legitimate by the various audiences as it suggests that either an audience is being made an outcast or that the individual has something to hide. The third option is to present a self, which merges the compatible elements of the selves associated with the audiences present, and downplays or hides those elements that are deemed to be potentially problematic in any context other than their own, theoretically allowing audiences to exist in a single space and maintain a universally recognisable self. In Goffman's terms (1963) the individual engages in careful information control and management, predominantly through methods of passing or covering. This is the re-centred self, however it is also by its very nature a compromised self. Recognition is achieved through others approving and affirming the identities that we display to them, the re-centred self, a collection of varying identities and roles, therefore will not be exactly congruent with any of the selves an individual's audiences will typically recognise resulting in the legitimacy of the performance being questioned. The extent to which each of these scenarios and any alternatives to them are utilised, the reasons for selecting a particular type of identity management and the interaction the success or failure of this has with the offline, are areas that have not been fully considered within the literature, in particular the selection process towards a certain mechanism of managing a Facebook identity and how an individual's existing social world and performances interact with this.

Some caution needs to be followed here, this is not to draw a direct dichotomy between the online and the offline as the first arguments surrounding the Internet and identity did. The nature of contemporary society and in particular the everyday use of mobile communication devices, which almost universally allow Internet access and actively encourage connectivity to Facebook, means that we live in a world where audiences are often brought together. Sharing a drink with an old friend, whilst texting a member of another audience or updating one's Facebook status, is not a surprising series of behaviours to witness. That audiences might overlap has always had to be a consideration for the actor, it is not a new or novel part of identity management, only now it is more pervasive with the emergence of new communication technologies. However, there is a key difference in the scenario described to that on Facebook. With the example given, the other audiences remain to a certain extent hidden, indeed the individuals receiving a text or reading the

status update will be unaware of another immediate audience whilst those events occur (unless they have been intentionally identified). The physically present audience as well is to a certain extent shielded from different audience members through the physical form of the technology itself. They cannot see the other audience member, they cannot hear them either, and they remain distant even though the interactions are occurring at the same time. They are not occupying the same space in the same way that they are on Facebook. This is the fundamental difference, and why it has been argued here so intently that managing the self on Facebook is an everyday spectacle which needs to be understood. How do people overcome this unique obstacle, why do they do so in the chosen manner and what is the impact of their choices? These are the central questions for this thesis and will be considered in closer detail next.

# METHODOLOGY

## INTRODUCTION

The broad aim of this thesis is to investigate and understand the relationship between Facebook and the performance of the self on this online social platform. More specifically it seeks to explore the possible existence and presentation of a re-centred self alongside other forms of identity management, and ascertain what influences an individual's choice in management style. Of further interest are the consequences of these decisions and performances for individuals' claims to be recognised, established here as a fundamental human need, and the dynamics of the interplay between on- and offline realms. To begin, an outline of the main research questions emergent from the existing literature and based on the above aims will be provided. Next a justification will be given of the use of Facebook as the focal research site, including a brief course of its history, the establishment of the SNS as a global phenomenon that spans across a myriad of people and finally an outline of its success both in scope, membership and longevity in comparison to similar sites such as Twitter and Google+.

However the primary focus of this chapter is a detailed discussion of the methodology employed in order to answer the said research questions. The core method used in order to achieve this was an extended period of around twelve months of ethnographic observation (using three identity case studies) which involved monitoring participant's everyday activity on Facebook, recording the data through traditional field notes but also through taking screenshots. Within this a secondary method of in-depth interviewing was carried out in order to access data which could not be witnessed through profile observations or required further clarification, and also allow any other unforeseen content come forth. This discussion will not only include a description of the methods used and the justification of using them but also make light of the planned methodology in comparison to what actually occurred and the problems encountered during the research process, including ethical issues.

This methodology chapter is somewhat longer than might be typically expected for a research thesis and this higher level of description is intentional. In comparison to other areas of sociological interest the Internet and cyberspace is a juvenile subject area, and only within approximately the last five years has it truly begun to be taken seriously amongst the general academic community. The use of Internet as a site for conducting research that extends beyond the distribution and hosting of surveys or questionnaires is an even newer concept than the Internet as a theoretically important subject. Despite being such a contemporary development there is a good range of methodological sources that focus exclusively on online research and individual online methods. Whilst these are of undoubted use, any researcher will know that implementing methods in the real world is peculiarly different to their articulation in books, particularly where qualitative research is concerned. Therefore, in order to gain a true understanding of the complexities of the online environment as a research site sociology, and the social sciences more generally, must endeavour to accumulate sources which detail using an online methodology from its practice. Detailed methodological description and contemplation of real field research is required to further more efficient, valid and reliable Internet studies, and this thesis is offered as a contribution towards this achievement. This is not to say that these sources do not already exist, there are numerous examples of such work, however given the transient nature of the Internet and indeed social life itself our knowledge should be constantly added to and updated<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> For examples specifically related to online ethnography see: Hine (2000), Miller and Slater (2000), Murthy (2008) and Sade-Beck (2004). These will be considered in more detail in the main body of the chapter.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From the review of the literature the following questions emerged:

- 1. How do individuals manage their identities on Facebook with multiple audiences simultaneously present?**
  - a. Is there evidence of a re-centred self on Facebook?
  - b. To what extent are early Internet theories on fragmented selves still relevant?
  - c. Do any other forms of identity management manifest on Facebook?
- 2. What influences an individual in their identity choices on Facebook?**
  - a. What part do audience expectations, prominence hierarchy and social norms play in an individual's decision to display or hide certain identities?
- 3. What impact does the impression management engaged with on Facebook have on the individual?**
  - a. What are the consequences for an individual's claims to be recognised, relationships and ontological security?

Within the literature there is a growing consideration that an individual's identities are being forced to merge, and a single self is therefore presented on SNSs such as Facebook. This is in contrast to early Internet theories where it was thought the self became fragmented, and multiple selves were being performed in separate windows. On Facebook where individuals are encouraged by the technology itself and now by social etiquette to have multiple audiences in a single space, the notion of fragmented identities online makes less sense than the idea of a re-centred self. However Facebook's own statistics suggest that a significant number of their accounts are duplicated, or in other words a single individual may have more than one Facebook account. This suggests that the fragmented self may not be as irrelevant as it may first seem. Therefore this thesis seeks to primarily discover is the ways in which individuals manage their identity on Facebook, and confirm the existence and relevance or not of the re-centred self and the fragmented self respectively, whilst also remaining open to the possibility of alternatives.

Secondly this thesis seeks to ascertain some of the reasoning behind individuals selection of a particular management style and within that what is deemed acceptable or not to display on their profile. Whilst there are inevitably uncountable nuances between individuals, there will be a focus on areas highlighted within the literature as influencing our performances. Firstly social norms, questioning to what extent individuals make their selections based on what they perceive to be agreeable to society in general, with the prediction that this will be more pertinent for profiles that contain very wide audiences and those with more open security settings however will not be absent amongst other profiles. There are, as has been discussed above, a variety of structural and social influences on an individual's identity construction and whom they interact with, and we learn appropriate behaviour and modes of being through this. Even when the individual is in a space where they may shield themselves from the view of the general public it is unlikely that years of ingrained learning can be temporarily forgotten.

The continuing influence of social norms will also be due to an individual's audiences being somewhat governed by the same social norms and expectations, which brings the thesis to the next point of research. An individual's audiences are specific groups of people the individual will have repeated contact with, and whom will have specialised knowledge of a particular role and/or performance and therefore will have additional or indeed contravening expectations of the individual over and above social norms. It is predicted that audiences that are present on Facebook will be given priority, and that within them there will be small numbers of individuals to whom performances are catered towards more than others based on their level of closeness with the profile owner. Finally is the prominence hierarchy of any given identity or performance, and it is hypothesised that this may be the most defining feature in determining how an individual manages their identity on Facebook and what identity elements are portrayed. The prominence hierarchy is somewhat determined by the quantity and quality of recognition received for a particular performance, however, it is also determined by the individual's own love and attachment to the particular identity. Therefore it is plausible that identities that are counter to social norms and audience expectations may have a place on Facebook as long as they are governed with careful impression management so as not to interfere with other identities.

After establishing what is happening on Facebook and why this is so, the final aim of the thesis is to establish what the implications are of the Facebook self for individuals in their everyday life. This involves ascertaining how the performances on Facebook may be an aid, hindrance or have little effect at all in individuals' quests to be recognised and their relationships with others. As a consequence of this it also concerns their feeling of ontological security, which is, in the absence of traditional sources, strongly rooted in our ties with others. Given the cyclical relationship and interconnectedness between the on- and offline, it is anticipated that poor impression management on Facebook is likely to have an undesirable effect for the individual across other areas of their life. If poor impression management is repeated often, then it will have a lasting destructive effect on the individual's sense of self, esteem and relationships. Conversely if impression management is conducted appropriately and is consistently successful then it is predicted that this will assist in maintaining existing levels of recognition, but could also potentially increase them. It should be noted here that the nature of this thesis is qualitative, and therefore a direct causal inference between impression management on Facebook and a particular outcome is not being sought. Rather an attempt to identify broad patterns is to be made, that may well require more in depth investigation in the future. Indeed given that the research is being conducted solely on Facebook addressing this question will largely rely on participants' descriptions of their life and interactions outside of this realm which may result in more theoretical conclusions being drawn rather than evidence based with the lack of direct observation.

## SITE SELECTION: WHY FACEBOOK?

In order to explore these ideas, a broadly ethnographic approach has been chosen, which involves online observation and also a set of loosely structured in depth online interviews based on three case studies of distinctive identity performances on the social networking site Facebook. Quantitative data on SNSs illustrates the extent to which they have become a pervasive part of the everyday for many people, and as a result their increasing importance in any sociological consideration of social behaviour. Facebook is currently and historically the most popular SNS, and announced 350 million registered members in December 2009 (an increase from just 59 million in 2007) reaching a phenomenal 1.15 billion in mid-2013 (Facebook, 2009, ComScore, 2007, Facebook 2013). During Facebook's emergence there have been a number of competitors (for example Bebo, Friendster, Google+) most of which have long since entered the Internet abyss and certainly none have come close to achieving the member number, daily activity or commercial value that Facebook has. MySpace, Facebook's previously biggest competitor (being of equal popularity in 2008), was forced to steer towards being a music based SNS and began to go through multiple, mostly unsuccessful, changes from 2009 when MySpace lost its tagline 'A Place For Friends' (TechCrunch, 2009)<sup>24</sup>.

Further, SNSs that have emerged more recently, are still not part of the everyday for anywhere near the numbers of individuals that Facebook is. Twitter is Facebook's closest competitor, however it is a different style of social networking that has primarily been adopted by celebrities and the under thirties, it is yet to gain the widespread appeal that Facebook has with just under 555 million active users (interestingly only sixty per cent of members actually make tweets, forty per cent are purely followers of others) (StatisticsBrain, 2013). The ill-fated Google+ has also made several attempts to convert Facebook users with minimal success, although the site reports a total of 400 million users, with 100 million using Google+ each month (Gundotra, 2012) the statistics are likely to be highly inaccurate – it is somewhat easy to stumble onto Google+ sites

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<sup>24</sup> MySpace went through a radical change in July, 2013 which involved deleting a wealth of user input data (without warning) causing outcry from its members as for some committed MySpacers nearly a decade's worth of blogs and communications were lost (Independent, 2013). Since the change there has been an increase in activity on MySpace, however, it is miniscule in comparison to Facebook activity.

without realising (now that Google has made it an integrated part of their empire), and further for the millions of Android users who use Google Play, a Google+ account is now required to be able to leave app ratings.

Not only is Facebook historically and presently the most popular SNS available, but membership is still increasing. As stated in the introduction, Facebook's member total has risen to 1.15 billion, a significant twenty-one per cent increase from 2012 (Facebook, 2013). Furthermore, in 2013 Facebook claimed 699 million daily logins by its users, a twenty-seven per cent increase from 2012 (Facebook, 2013). Facebook's continuing popularity is showcased in its commercial appeal as well, of its overall revenue of just under \$1.5 billion nearly \$1.25 billion is from advertising (around thirty per cent of which is generated through the mobile app), and although there has been a dip in revenue between the last quarter of 2012 compared to the first quarter of 2013 of around \$100 million generally revenue is increasing each year (TechCrunch, 2013)<sup>25</sup>. In 2008 Facebook launched Facebook Connect which "allows users to "connect" their Facebook identity, friends and privacy to any site" (Facebook, 2008), and in 2012 24.3 per cent of the world's 10,000 most popular websites have some form of Facebook integration, with 49.3% of the 10,000 containing at least a web link to Facebook (Royal Pingdom, 2012) and finally nearly 200,000 mobile apps use integrated Facebook login (InsideFacebook, 2012). The pervasiveness of Facebook therefore is not only limited to its primary use as a means of interacting directly with social networks but its appearance on and connectivity with other social mediums and platforms. For anyone with Internet or mobile data access Facebook becomes almost unavoidable as the number of apps and sites that require login for the best user experience increases.

There are 700 billion minutes spent on Facebook each month, with each separate visit made by an individual lasting for approximately twenty minutes (StatisticsBrain, 2013). So whilst it may not hold our attention for very long at any given moment, it does so on a repeated and consistent basis, further more in any given twenty minutes on Facebook two million friend requests and three million messages are sent and whether an individual is online or not this activity continues twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Much like a

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<sup>25</sup> In comparison to the first quarter of 2012, Facebook revenue was up by approximately \$300 million, and indeed in the final quarter of 2011 there was a jump in revenue followed by a drop in the first quarter of 2012 (TechCrunch, 2013). Therefore the decline from the end of 2012 to the beginning of 2013 may not be indicative of falling revenue overall.

society, Facebook only exists because of the individuals who reside in it and each individual will make some form of unique contribution to it, however it is not dependent on any one individual and exists, evolves and grows in spite of them. However Facebook is not an online only phenomenon, it travels with individuals on mobile devices, their daily interactions with others, advertising and through language use, for example, the creation of 'Facebooking' meaning to contact another through Facebook or the more controversially named 'Fraping' which is the act of hijacking someone's profile and making false profile changes and status updates. Whilst other SNS have achieved similar types of impact, none have done so to the worldwide extent that Facebook has, and with its popularity on the whole still growing, it is the most logical and appropriate site to use to investigate the workings and implications of managing an online self.

## CASE STUDIES

Three case studies based on cultural, sexual and health related identities are used as a base from which to examine the proposed research questions. Individuals could be researched without the use of case studies, however this would result in a much longer and complicated process, as it would have opened up the entire population of Facebook to be researched and no particular space on Facebook in which to find potential participants. Without the case studies, the research lacks direction. Case studies allow researchers to “understand a real-life phenomenon in depth” (Yin, 2009: 18). For observation purposes the case studies will allow the researcher to see more clearly the processes of impression management in action through the focus on a particular identity, and for the interviews it will give participants some context with which to relate their actions and opinions as thinking about identity as a whole can be a complex and potentially overwhelming task. Case studies contextualise the subject matter of the thesis and make the often otherwise intangible notions of identity and recognition into more perceptible artefacts. Identity is not a single entity, nor is it a static one, by choosing to focus on a particular element of self instead of the whole allows for a much more in-depth investigation of the processes that are taking place as it give the researcher if not a smaller map from which to situate and follow the individual then at least a given route to follow.

Each case study that is being used for this thesis has been selected on the basis that each will require different forms of impression management by individuals in order to maintain a network of audiences in a single space on Facebook. The range of case studies are sufficiently different in their levels of perceived taboo or deviant nature to allow for a range of impression management techniques and presentations of self to emerge. In line with Goffman’s (1963) discussion of visibility the offline perceptibility of the identity is also expected to impact the level and types of management required. The case studies to be used for this research are the subcultural identity of Goth, the sexual identity of fetishism, and finally health related identity of having an eating disorder, and from this alone give a variety of standpoints from which to answer the research questions of this thesis. Without these broad distinctions however each case study brings with it

subtle differences in its requirements for the construction and management of identity, which be considered in detail next.

It may initially seem at odds to have selected case studies that focus on problematic identities when the literature review and indeed the research questions discuss identity in a far more general manner. However there are a number of reasons this decision was made, the benefits of which are perceived to outweigh the limitations using stigmatised identities may present. Firstly there are some methodological considerations; as mentioned above, selecting specific identities gave the researcher the framework with which to access participants. Of course it could be argued that this could have been achieved with non-deviant identities, however those with problematic identities are noted for their levels of activity online (for example, Farnham and Churchill, 2011), and indeed Goths themselves are recognised as being very early Internet participators (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007 and Mercer, 2002). In terms of data collection, higher levels of activity meant more data, and after a disastrous experience with data generation for their Masters dissertation, this was something the researcher was acutely aware of. Obviously on its own this does not warrant the use of problematic identities, and it became apparent this need not have been a concern, however hindsight was not available in the planning stages.

More significantly, the stigmatised individual is compelled to engage with heightened levels and forms of impression management on a daily basis, and as a result arguably become increasingly socially and self aware. Further, those with problematic identities often engage with impression management in more explicit and conscious ways in comparison to others, which has the consequence of being better equipped and more able to articulate these processes. So, not only does using participants with deviant or taboo identities open up the possibility of witnessing impression management in a more obvious manner, it also offers the possibility of a more frank and detailed discussion of it. To appropriate Goffman's (1963) words, using problematic identities as case studies may "loom large" the process of identity management on Facebook. The notion of managing identity and the consequences of poor information control and impression management, whilst unlikely to be articulated in such terms, will not be unfamiliar concepts for individuals with stigmatising elements of self. For a novice researcher and ethnographer, this was a comforting thought,

however for even the most experienced it might be quite difficult to extract the processes of identity management involved in, for example, being a car enthusiast. It is worth reiterating at this point that the interest here is not in what constitutes having a particular identity, but what the processes are in managing an identity (within the context of Facebook), in order to do this the identity in question must necessarily require managing.

It is also worth considering that Goffman (1959) argues there is deception within the performance repertoire of all individuals, that “somewhere in the full round of his [sic] activities there will be something he [sic] cannot treat openly” (Goffman, 1959, p.71). At times then, everyone will need to engage with more stringent forms of impression management, even if for only fleeting moments. However, if this is so then the reverse is equally as plausible, that there will be times for those with problematic identities where they do not require managing, that they are not a relevant consideration in the given context. More than this though, having a stigmatising identity does not negate that individuals will also be managing their other roles and performances in the same manner that everyone is. Everyday impression management techniques are still very much applicable to those with a problematic identity, they simply have another layer of management to maintain that is specifically derived from the stigmatising element. The deviant identity is managed *alongside* other elements of self, not *instead* of. General practices of impression management then may still be considered via the lens of the stigmatised individual.

Furthermore it might be considered that managing a problematic element of self *is* everyday identity management for those with a Goth, eating disorder or fetish self – it might not be ‘normal’ for the majority, but equally there is very little in social life that can truly be claimed as so. Had the participants not had a stigmatising identity then they would have inevitably been segregated in other ways, perhaps the more traditional sociological considerations of gender, ethnicity, age or class; generally it is conceded within the social sciences that one shoe does not fit all. No matter how participants were selected or on what basis, certain considerations for generalizability would need to be addressed, not least because of the qualitative, ethnographic, nature of the research as a whole. Invariably the research here would never be able to make definitively generalizable conclusions.

In summary the use of case studies allows the researcher to focus their eye on particular identities so as to give a more in-depth account, rather than attempt to track a multitude of selves for each individual in equal measure which for the numbers of participants used here would be an undertaking far exceeding the practical limits of this thesis. It also allows the participant to have a clearer focus during the interviews therefore eliciting, hopefully, a higher quality of data. Furthermore the use of identities that are to varying extents potentially problematic will allow a clearer assessment of the impact of social norms and audience expectations. Goffman (1963) has successfully illustrated the importance of these areas when discussing stigmatised identities, the difference here being the online environment in which these identities come to be played out and Facebook as an advocate of having different audiences simultaneously present. Using problematic or stigmatised identities will also test the importance of the prominence hierarchy, exemplifying how an individual negotiates between their dedication to an identity and the perception of how others will react to it. Furthermore, the consequences of poor impression management on Facebook are likely to be exacerbated for those who are seen to have a deviant or taboo element of self. So although using case studies of potentially problematic identities may exaggerate the processes occurring on Facebook, it is this exaggeration that allows answers to the research questions to be established with detail and clarity.

## **EATING DISORDERS**

Eating disorders are in basic terms often psychological disorders that involve extreme abnormalities in eating, whether this be starvation, bingeing or purging (Rosen in Crowther, 1992, p. 157). It is part of an eating disorder to attempt to hide it from others, and importantly from those close to individuals, often only revealed to those whom are found to share the problem. Pro-ana and similar sites have been fairly prominent in some media circles and the damaging effects such sites may have. There have been LiveJournal pages for years for people with eating disorders, these have been moving to SNS groups as well, some are members only some are public content. Groups are both pro-ana/mia, and also anti-ana/mia, those set up as informational groups seem to turn towards being pro. By 'pro', this is not necessarily advocating that people should strive

to have an eating disorder, more a place of support and discussion for those who already have the disorder, but will often appear 'pro' in nature because ultimately there is an element of an unwritten encouragement on them. This is however more about understanding that antagonism will not help anyone with an eating disorder, with a focus instead on ensuring people with eating disorders stay relatively safe and most importantly alive and know that when things are particularly difficult there is somewhere to go without judgement. In the offline world anorexia is more difficult to disguise than perhaps bulimia, it is clearly visible in its extreme cases, whereas the effects of bulimia are do not necessarily include dramatic weight loss, although eventually will result in hair loss, acne and teeth erosion. Although a medical condition, the eating disorder will become incorporated into the individual's identity. Even after treatment, there will likely be remission periods, and it will commonly stay with the individual for the rest of their life.

The question arises of how do people negotiate this part of their identity, especially where they are not in treatment for the disorder and have kept it secret from close friends and family members, and most others in their life – who are also on their Facebook friend's list. Even where the eating disorder has been revealed, in part, if not to one and all, this part of the self will still have to be negotiated in some way, revelation does not equal acceptance. It is anticipated therefore that if the fragmented self remains to have any relevancy then it will be this case study which reveals it. This case study would obviously have a great deal of ethical considerations ordinarily as a research subject in and of itself, however the emphasis is on negotiating the eating disorder as an identity, not on talking about the eating disorder itself. Regardless this is still a potentially troublesome case study, as given its nature the physical safety of participants would be continually at risk through their own actions. For the most part emotional distance was kept between the researcher and participants through observing rather than participating, however at times it was still a rather harrowing experience (reflexive thoughts on the research will be considered at the end of the chapter).

## FETISHISM

Fetishism is a very broad heading and within it are a wealth of different sexual attractions and levels of desire within them, furthermore with very different public reactions to them. Light BDSM has been entering mainstream sexuality for a considerable time, with the popularity of shops such as Ann Summers which have long offered blindfolds, floggers and PVC attire. More recently the success of the 'Fifty Shades of Grey' books have introduced a more intense interest in the roles of Master and slave, although such cultural artefacts are mocked by those more committed to BDSM and Dom(me)/submissive lifestyles. So whilst there is some public acceptance of alternative sexual lifestyles that involve BDSM or control relationships, even lighter forms will happen behind closed doors, and the more extreme versions would still likely be shocking to those who do not hold such desires. Within much academic literature there is a regard for individuals with deviant sexual desires to be somehow psychologically defective or damaged (predominantly psychiatric literature, for example, Wulff, 1946; Greenacre, 1953; Bak, 1953 and Raymond, 1956). These often negative attitudes are however unsurprising given that BDSM and fetishism remain specifically listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders. Yet it should be noted that such a characterisation is becoming increasingly controversial, and alongside the increased public acceptance of 'kink' academics too are beginning to proffer alternative assessments of fetishists that are far more positive (for example see Wright, 2010).

As Giddens has noted, sexuality is increasingly becoming a marker of identity rather than simply a biological urge to procreate. Our sexual desires become a part of an individual's sense of self, which for some in the extreme becomes a lifestyle choice that is lived as a permanent fixture. However given the variability in types and levels of fetishes, and the growing acceptance of mild fetishism, this case study is ideal for revealing the more subtle nuances in decision making in what to share on Facebook and what not to disclose, and to reveal if there are forms of impression management beyond the fragmented and the re-centred self. Furthermore sexual deviancy can, more often than not, be quite easily hidden, it is not an automatically visible identity such as Goth, and its revelation is largely the individual's choice.

## GOTH

Goth is a long standing subculture, it is also a less extreme deviant or taboo part of identity than either sexual fetishism or eating disorders. Being a Goth is a very visual identity, there is a certain aesthetic that is a vital part of Goth culture which is easily identifiable in the offline. Therefore disclosure by the individual for it to be known that they are a Goth is not required, it comes through their appearance. There are, in comparison to the other two case studies, minimal conflicts that may arise with other identities. The most obvious conflict may be within the context of work and work based connections, where a different presentation of self entirely may be required. However the Goth identity may cause problems in the offline with those who do not know the individual. Given that Goth is such a visual identity it is likely that anyone who is part of their network on Facebook will be aware of this identity and to an extent accept if not understand it. This case study then should reveal how an alternative, predominantly 'public', visual and unhidden deviant identity is negotiated with regards to having multiple audiences in one space.

However, although the Goth identity may not present too many problems for those who already know the individual in question, as stated it is those wholly outside which may be problematic. Indeed the Goth identity has been vilified in the media, most predominantly in US media however after the Columbine shootings misplaced fear surrounding Goths spread the Western world (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007 and Frymer, 2009). More recently in the UK however after the tragic death Sophie Lancaster who was beaten to death trying to protect her boyfriend from attack by a group of young men, there has been more sympathy towards Goths and other alternatively dressed collectives. Indeed Greater Manchester police in early April of 2013 announced they would be considering attacks on subcultural members as hate crimes, which although not recognised in national legislation and therefore having little judicial impact, the publicity was generally seen as positive (BBC, 2013).

Each case study will contribute something unique to answering the research questions set out for this thesis, and as a collective will provide an overall account of what is happening on Facebook, why it is occurring and the implications of this regarding an individual's identity and sense of self. More details concerning the

general use of the Internet by each case study will be considered in the analysis section of the thesis in order to ascertain what peculiarities are resonant on Facebook only.

## PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND SAMPLE

A profile was created for each of the case studies that were completely separate and unlinked from each other. The profiles each contained an explanation of the research and the researcher's intentions in the main body of the profile as in *Figure 1* below:

I am a PhD student in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) at the University of Kent. For my thesis I am investigating the effect of social networking sites on social norms and obligations, that is, the largely unwritten rules people abide by in their everyday life and the expectations others have of them. To do this I am looking at how people manage particular aspects of their identities online that may need more thought and consideration than others. I am also looking at how people manage having different friendship and other social groups in one space, here on Facebook, which may not have any contact or knowledge of each other in real life. I then want to see how this feeds back into their identity management.

I am using this profile as part of my research, therefore if you are listed as a friend your activity on Facebook may be monitored and used as part of the PhD and future academic publications that come from this.

No identifiable information is used, all those involved in the research will be given pseudonyms, and names and images/photos will also be blocked out and blurred where screen shots are taken. Any information that is collected during the research will only be viewable in its raw form to the researcher and will be kept on a password protected file on a password protected USB stick. This profile is also a closed profile to protect your anonymity further.

Where direct quotations/screen shots of profiles are used then I will ask you directly if it is ok to use them in my research.

If you do not wish to participate in the research, then simply remove me as a friend. If you want any information that might have been collected about you to be omitted from the thesis, then please send me a message requesting that this is done. By remaining as a friend on this profile you are consenting to be a part of the research.

Once the research is complete and has been written up a draft of the thesis will be made available to all that have participated before it is submitted for you to give any feedback or raise any questions or disagreements.

There will also be an opportunity to participate in some online interviews at a later stage, to which all of the above also applies.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me either here or email me at [k\\_n8510@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:k_n8510@yahoo.co.uk), or should you wish to make a complaint please contact my university department (SSPSSR).

Thank you!

*Figure 1:* Screenshot of research explanation contained of each case study profiles.

From these profiles the researcher joined different active groups on Facebook relevant to the case study in question, with their being active determined by having post made on them within the last month at the point of finding them. The search process involved a simple search of relevant keywords for each case study and

expanding from there as groups would often advertise within each other (whether this was condoned by group moderators or not). Originally it was intended that some time would be spent on the various groups, although data from them would not be collected, in order to friend individuals from them. However spending time on the groups was unnecessary for all three case studies as participants willingly friended the researcher without group input. Whilst a few direct friend requests were made by the researcher, the predominant number of participants sent the initial friend request. Status updates and messages were sent on Facebook reminding participants that the profile was a research profile and that their appearance as a friend necessitated their involvement in it; however this did not generally deter individuals. The participant request process did not have a finite time set, and throughout the research more friend requests were sent to the researcher, which were accepted.

Each profile had unique profile photos which were recent but different images of the researcher, as the researcher frequently changed their aesthetic appearance this was not difficult to achieve and simply came from their archive of photos. The names of each profile were also variable, although still close to the researcher's actual name should a participant have wanted to contact the university regarding the research but none of which used the researcher's full real name as this was already in use for their personal Facebook profile. Profiles had strict privacy settings in order to protect participants (more details of which will be discussed in the ethics section of this chapter) but also for practical reasons, keeping each case study separate allowed much easier management of data as the researcher did not have to keep track of who belonged to which case study.

It should be noted here that the decision to use a single profile for all of the case studies, or indeed using the researcher's own existing profile were rejected for a number of reasons. Firstly using the researcher's existing profile would be problematic in that it already has a certain presentation of self embedded within it, one that is unlikely to be useful for the research itself and will be biased towards particular people, interactions and events. Secondly, the profile would have to be altered significantly in order to make it more appropriate for the research. Altering the profile is likely to also change the carefully crafted impression management the researcher has performed on this profile, and potentially this could cause aggravation

between the researcher and their network, and thus be quite problematic. Further it may also be harmful to the researcher's contacts by connecting them with others whom they may come into conflict with, and in the same manner would also be harmful to participants as well. Although using an existing profile would have been beneficial in terms of having a strong network and a more established presence, the problems and issues attached with this far outweighed any justification for doing so. As it transpired being friendless and activity-less did not pose a problem in terms of gaining participants.

Using a single profile for all case studies would create a situation in which the researcher's impression management would be more akin to that being performed by participants as they would be required to negotiate different audiences simultaneously. However, again, it was intended that each case study was presented with an identity from the researcher that was as honest and open as possible, and combining these presentations to appease all case studies was likely to lead to a presentation of the researcher that is considerably more deceptive than would be the case in having separate profiles. As will be discussed later in this chapter, separate profiles also meant that more data protection techniques could be implemented. Further, having all participants in one space also decreases the effective attention the researcher can give them in terms of protection from emotional harm. All of the case studies have been selected on the basis that they present identities that require different forms of impression management, and are all to varying degrees potentially problematic when faced with a variety of audiences. Within their own networks, the audiences are likely at least to be made up from people who the participants know and have some connection with that is valued enough for the impression management to take place. Placing all participants together in a single space then creates a new audience, made of strangers, that are unpredictable and unknown, which may cause some anxiety to participants, perhaps pushing them to be more reserved in their interactions with the researcher for fear of the unknown others who will also be able to see these interactions. It further, given the diversity in the case studies, may have opened participants to increased potential of conflict and animosity, especially where the researcher is not online and cannot monitor the interactions between those on the network. With a separate profile for each case study, the participants had at least one guaranteed shared identity with others in the network, and also had an increased chance of

having some association with each other, creating the feeling and actuality of a safer environment for participants.

## **LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH and TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES**

One benefit of conducting the research as an online ethnography is that it allowed for a longer research period as the researcher did not have to arrange travel or effectively live somewhere else for a finite amount of time due to employment commitments and financial constraints as would be the case in offline ethnographies. Conducting the ethnography online allowed the researcher to remain in their current location and maintain other commitments at the same time as engaging with the research. As a result of this the conclusions drawn from the data are not a result of first impressions, and have been thoughtfully processed over time (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

This is an important consideration for this thesis, as a considerable amount of research on the Internet is based on single moments in time. Although there are a range of methods used, both quantitative and qualitative in essence, Internet research is largely cross sectional, meaning that a single set of participants are considered in a single space at a single time. Although such research is required in the study of any social phenomenon, it should be accompanied by longitudinal research to create a more in-depth and accurate portrayal of that being researched. Furthermore, the Internet is constantly evolving and changing, a snapshot of a particular moment, may, when the work is finally published, which in some cases may take well over a year to occur, then be theoretically inadequate in explaining the situation – first impressions in this case account for very little. Online research needs to be constantly updated and developed to match the rate of change in the technology and dynamic of the Internet itself. Changes in the environment may lead to changes in behaviour and also to the meaning attributed to that behaviour and environment, which if this occurs will of course be interesting points of analysis in themselves and are not necessarily detrimental to the research. This is where longitudinal research is beneficial as it gives the researcher more time to be reflexive about any changes in technology, technical or social, that occur during the research period, and although it will not capture all changes as there is inevitably a beginning and end to the research and nor does it solve the issue of publication times, it does give more scope than cross sectional research.

During the research Facebook went through a major technological and aesthetic shift as it gradually rolled in the Timeline moving away from the traditional profile set up. Initially members could opt in to the Timeline (launched in September 2011), and many were reluctant to do so seemingly because of the heightened interconnectivity and transparency (but also because whenever a change is made people tend to collectively have an unnecessary outcry about it) however the Timeline became enforced in March 2012 (Mashable, 2012 and Pom8, 2012). This saw the removal of the linear text driven wall being the central port of profiles, and instead created a dynamic face that gave a snap shot view of all an individual's recent activities from photo updates and tags, to status updates, to recent locations, creating a much more interactive 'story' about the individual. The timeline also kept a chronological essence to it and indeed made this much easier to negotiate with clickable months for the current year visible and subsequent years beneath this which extend to the individual's year of birth, making it extremely simple for others to navigate the entirety of the individual's life - at least the content of which they have chosen to upload to Facebook.

This significance in this change is the heightened disclosure it almost forces upon Facebook members. Whilst members have always had control over the content which they upload, if it was 'missed' on a Newsfeed then others would have to actually search for it. Whereas now it is conveniently placed in a single location amongst much other contextually relevant content, which will give legitimacy to the update in whatever form it may appear – repeated instances of an identity will only serve to reinforce the trust others have in the performance and therefore lead to recognition being secured. Conversely it also makes it simpler for impression management to go awry. Content that the individual may have long forgotten about is still easily accessible by others, and which may no longer be congruent to the self or selves being currently performed. Furthermore, as before, an individual cannot entirely control the content they are tagged in by others, it is the fact that again this content can be viewed collectively, and may contravene the performance being upheld by the individual. For example, a status update about having the flu knowing that work colleagues are a present audience, situated with photographs tagged of the individual intoxicated on the night previously. The transference to the Timeline has made this research more pertinent than before, and

although the complete roll out transpired after the completion of the research, had this been a cross-sectional piece of research, or even a time limited ethnography, then this important change would have been missed.

## ONLINE OBSERVATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to establish how members of each case study manage their identity in combination with their other identities and audiences a period of observation was conducted which in all lasted around twelve months. The aim of the observation was to generate data on where, when and how individuals implement impression management and self presentation, through observing their posts, their interactions with others and the content of their profile pages. As the primary method the observation element provided the majority of data to independently inform answers to the research questions; however a secondary aim was to reveal areas of interest and specific events to discuss in the interview stage of the research. Initially it was anticipated that participant observation would be necessary in order to build rapport and relationships between participants and researcher leading up to the interviews, following the logic that the researcher would have:

“a greater likelihood of securing interviews if they take the time to get to know the people they are studying, to develop relationships with them, and to build trust between respondents and themselves... laying the relational groundwork for future interviews not only enhances their access to study populations, but, based on depth, commitment, and trust, these longitudinal associations may lead to research that yields richer portraits of the subjects” (Adler and Adler, 2002: 526-7).

However although attempts were made in the initial stages of the research to engage with participants, it was somewhat awkward, and ultimately unnecessary. The vast majority of participants were seemingly content with having the researcher lurking on their profile without communication being forced upon them. Interactions did occur, however these were uncommon and often brief. Given the type of information being sought it was also decided that it was beneficial for the researcher to retain a certain level of distance allowing participants to engage with actual Facebook friends in a ‘natural’ fashion without interruption. A

single comment by the researcher could have well changed the course of the comments that followed, particularly given the specialised identities participants were selected through. As the research progressed it became apparent that interjecting into participants' Facebook world would have quite often been inappropriate, given the nature of some of the interactions that occurred particularly with the eating disorder case study, but also some of the interactions that were attempted to be gained from the researcher within the fetish case study. In a practical sense too however, observing participants was more than adequate to generate quality data from which to answer the research questions, and indeed observation alone was at times difficult to maintain, let alone attempting to keep track of multiple communications. The number of responses to participate in the research were much higher than expected, and in hindsight it would have been beneficial to make observations of each case study in turn to make more effective use of the time available.

Androutsopoulos (2008) used ethnography in combination with linguistic based methods but advocated the use of online ethnography more broadly: "The value of doing ethnography on the Internet is not only as a research tool but also as a conceptual and methodological bridge to other research traditions". One benefit of ethnography is that it can act as an umbrella under which many other methods can be put in practice using the same data. This is particularly useful in a new research setting as multiple methods can be trialled and tested however should a method fail in some respect, the data may still be useful. Boellstorff (2009) advocated online research, but in particular ethnographic based methods, as providing a scenario in which for the first time the social sciences can conduct 'experiments' like those in the 'natural' sciences, with Castronova calling them the online the "social equivalent of a petri-dish" (Castronova, 2006, p.170). Although almost only a passing comment, linked to this is the assertion made by Gatson (2011) that the online itself is often ethnographic in form, with individuals taking passages of text, image and video from elsewhere and sharing it with others (despite blurred lines of permission and copyright). Using the example of 419 emails (also known as Nigerian scam emails) Coleman illustrates how even a tiny element of the Internet can connect "various worlds, types of people, and activities" in social, political and technological ways (Coleman, 2010, p.498). Given such complexities Coleman claims that "ethnographic research is well suited... to

unearth the remarkable depth, richness and variability of digital media in everyday life” (Coleman, 2010, p.498). Ethnography then seems fundamentally suited to the online environment.<sup>26</sup>

However, it is important to remember that ethnography is by its very nature “selective and partial” and whether online, offline or both it will only ever reveal detail about a very narrow social or cultural phenomena (Wilson, 2006, p.310). With the scope of access the Internet offers for ethnographers, particularly those interested in vulnerable or difficult to reach groups, there is potential to neglect the inherent limitations of ethnography that are carried into the online research site. There will be a tendency, for example, for data to be collected from the most popular and active sites and participants, as in the offline those who are well connected will be made a feature of (Rotman et al, 2012).

As Rotman et al (2012) have outlined, there are also many challenges specific to online ethnography itself. First, “large scale online environments do not lend themselves well to holistic observation” with sometimes billions of potential participants researchers must make “difficult decisions about the segments of data that are pertinent for addressing their research questions” (Rotman et al, 2012, p.3). For this research the specific focus is identity and the use of case studies has enabled a narrowing of the field, a means with which to recruit participants and a way of making an enormous wealth of data meaningful; attempting to research Facebook in its entirety would be highly problematic. Again due to the size of online environments, it is virtually impossible to systematically capture all levels of interaction, between ‘objects’ (videos, images and so on), people, objects and people, public and private variations, integration with the offline, and finally the connections between all of these variant performances of connectivity (Rotman et al, 2012). Even with a narrowing of the field it was impossible to track all interactions between individuals and other ‘objects’ on Facebook, private messages being most obvious, however more generally the multitude of different connections occurring simultaneously appearing on the researcher’s newsfeed alone was an overwhelming amount of data to consider. However, this is partially counteracted due to the data remaining on Facebook indefinitely unless a user decides to delete it or deactivate their account. Sade-Beck (2004) identifies the

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<sup>26</sup> For a more thorough account of the philosophical, disciplinary and methodological benefits of Internet research see Hine (2005).

possibility of deletion as a problem for online ethnographic work, however in this instance it was very rare for users to delete their posts – in fact as far as the researcher observed this did not appear to occur through the duration of the research. There were occasions where profiles were deactivated, but again instance was very rare and these were mostly confined to the eating disorder case study and were an act by Facebook not the participant. The disappearance of data was not a particular concern for this thesis, and indeed it could be argued that the opposite was more problematic with there often being an overwhelming amount of data to consider.

The issues with online ethnography are confounded by its implementation in a relatively new research environment which researchers remain unsure about. As a consequence of this the processes many researchers have implemented have not been entirely methodologically convincing, often lacking in explanation of decision making, or, perhaps as a result of the uncertainty encountered when using ethnography online, are ethically dubious. The most renowned example is Van Gelder (1991), a male psychiatrist who posed as a disabled woman named 'Joan', after discovering that "women were much more open and intimate with him when they mistook his computer identity as female" (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 55). When his true identity was revealed the women that had been deceived described the experience as "mind rape, pure and simple", and also expressed a deep hurt and disappointment that 'Joan' a woman they had become close to, did not in fact exist (Participant in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 55 and Poster, 2001: 267).

Of course deception may also occur in offline research, of which there are numerous examples. Laud Humphreys' (1970) *Tearoom Trade* is a prime example, whereby the researcher covertly observed participants, illegally obtained their addresses through their car number plates, and then posed as a health worker to interview them (Humphreys, 1975). However with the Van Gelder example the relative anonymity made affordable by the online environment was directly manipulated in order for the researcher to deceive the women involved with no appreciation that this was an unethical thing to do, illustrating the sheer ignorance at the time surrounding the reality of online relationships and activities. Murthy (2008) highlights that covert ethnography is common in both on- and offline realms where the focus of the research is on deviant groups or sexuality. When this is considered in conjunction with the Internet as an environment that

offers access to marginalised collectives that for the majority of researchers would typically be unobtainable, it is not especially surprising that a disproportionate amount of online ethnography is covert (Murthy, 2008)<sup>27</sup>. The irony of course being that it is these marginalised groups which should heed the most ethical reflection, however increasingly the online nature of research does not excuse poor ethical forethought. The ethnography conducted for this thesis, for example, was pushed for more ethical regulation and procedure than would have been expected had the ethnography been conducted offline.

In terms of being methodologically weak, Danah Boyd, a leading Internet theorist and researcher, often neglects any in-depth consideration of the methods she uses, including ethnography and participant observation. For example, in Boyd's most recent offering *It's Complicated* (2014) there is barely a page's worth of content given to methodological description, despite the claim that she has been researching the book for some seven years. Even where Boyd is addressing methodology directly (see Boyd, 2008 in Markham and Baym), the discussion still lacks a great deal of insight, without thought for the notion of reflexivity and the researcher experience. Some of this neglect may in part be due to Boyd's computer scientific background, rather than a sociological one, however Boyd is certainly not alone in this neglect of methodological concern. In general, ethnography has improved greatly with more reflexive and detailed accounts being given, and the same then needs to be done with online research meaning that researcher needs to take account of the impact of their own cultural, social and historical background which will inevitably influence the way they approach their research, their participants, the analysis of data and the conclusions drawn from it – in the same way that it does in offline research.

However, some of these criticisms are temporally based, as a new environment for research, and in itself a new research tool, much of the earlier research on the Internet lacked methodological direction and was

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that Murthy's own research was semi-covert as he began by making analysis of publically available material without consent before enlisting participants for interviews. Murthy identifies social networking sites as a useful tool for ethnography as the researcher may "invisibly observe" participants, and later states "permission may sometimes be the recommended path for social researchers" (2008, p.845, 846). This is not a format the researcher here would advocate, it is essential to seek consent at all times not just 'sometimes'. As social researchers we have a responsibility to be as transparent as it is possible and safe to do so (and it would have easily have been the case to do so within the remit of Murthy's research), else a mockery is made of the profession as a source of trust.

open, in the hands of an inexperienced or simply inconsiderate researchers, to serious ethical problems largely as a result of being something 'new'. Since the idea for the research presented here materialised online research has come a considerable way, and it is recognised it must be given the same considerations as research offline, particularly in the protection of participants, but also in terms of the structure and process of implementing a method itself.

Christine Hine has engaged extensively with online ethnography as a researcher and as a methodological commentator, although in terms of publications favours the latter of these positions. Hine (2000) has written generally on online methodologies throughout the historical development of the Internet but has particularly proffered ethnographical insight and does so in a manner that cuts through much of the fantasy surrounding the potential of online research. Some of the theoretical discussion at the beginning of the book is somewhat of its time, albeit Hine provides a fairly well balanced sceptical approach that tends to be the default attitude towards the Internet currently including the blurred lines of what is reality. However the continuing value of the work and others like it comes from the presentation of methodological and ethical dilemmas common within online based ethnography, providing a thought provoking aid and guide to the budding online ethnographer.

For this thesis, Hine's insight into virtual ethnography as one of intermittent engagement a posed to long term immersion was of great use and certainly comfort once the research process had begun. It is not feasible for a researcher to be within in their online environment on a continual basis, and mutually, nor will participants be present at all moments. The Internet is constructed through intermittent engagement, and there is no avoiding this, therefore online ethnography will never quite be like its offline peer in terms of immersion as 'lived experience'. Much of online ethnography involves 'catching up' with what has been missed in the interim time periods, and therefore sustained engagement and communication with participants can be difficult to achieve. The researcher will not necessarily witness action and interaction as it occurs and will be forced to look upon it with retrospect, alongside their participants. Recognition of this was particularly helpful given the unexpected number of participants who made up the present research and the amount of data generated as a result.

In addition methodological description, there is an increasing amount of research that is methodologically and ethically reflexive and accountable. For example, Boellstorff (2008) engaged in an extensive participant observation ethnography on the virtual world Second Life and provided one of the first in-depth ethnographic pieces of research which not only took the phenomenon of Second Life seriously, but again like many of the above also advocated engagement with online methodologies more generally. Boellstorff claims that "...studying virtual worlds "in their own terms" is not only feasible but crucial to developing research methods that keep up with the realities of technological change" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 4). Much like this thesis, Boellstorff (2008) took interest in the everyday interactions and social forms that occurred, reflecting the descriptive and analytical content that would be expected in ethnographic research, rather than entering a 'good' versus 'bad' debate that is usually rarely seen in traditional ethnography (and indeed goes against the fundamental premise of conducting an ethnography).

Miller and Slater (2000) of course engaged in a large scale online ethnography nearly a decade prior to Boellstorff, and it could be argued pioneered the notion that the Internet does not mean the death of space and geography. They conducted a ground breaking ethnography based in Trinidad involving a range of Internet platforms and social contexts, ultimately illustrating that the Internet was by no means a separate entity to the offline and that the two were inextricably connected – from business, to religion, to politics. Miller and Slater's attention to detail in the conduct of their ethnography is to be thoroughly commended, however their dedication to the cause, so to speak, is also its downfall. Too much of the analysis is taken 'as seen', meaning that observations are considered only as they appear with little accompanying reflexivity. As Martin (2002) states, Miller and Slater fail to recognise that findings are not just "waiting to be discovered, but are always socially produced", and this very much includes those online. So whilst Miller and Slater's work is of undoubted importance, it lacks that element of reflexivity (a crucial component of the method) that emerges in later Internet based works.

Sade-Beck (2004) presents an interesting and insightful account of the difficulties that occur when considering online ethnographies, and one that descends from their own primary research concerning bereavement within an Israeli context. Whilst the focus is on anthropology, it is also largely applicable to

sociologists, and certainly many of the questions posed by Sade-Beck (for example, keeping 'track' of participants, lack of physical cues, and when to engage with non-active observation) were of considerable relevance for this research. Much like Miller and Slater (2000), and Murthy (2008) Sade-Beck emphasizes the point that the on- and offline cannot be seen as distinct entities, that as we incorporate 'real life' into a virtual world we create "a broader definition of reality" (Sade-Beck, 2004, p.48), a point that this thesis is in firm concurrence with. As a result of this Sade-Beck engaged with a multi-moded methodology that merged the on- and offline, and also used non-human artefacts as a means of creating a more holistic account of Israeli support communities. Murthy also emphasized that social networking sites as a base for ethnography are beneficial for their storage of various material from "even the most marginal social movements or groups" yet must also be "contextualised properly" (Murthy, 2008, p.845, 846). The presentations of self on social networking sites cannot be taken for granted as encompassing the whole of the individual or their life, they must be situated within other environments and consideration given to what the use or purpose of the site is.

The decision to remain in a purely online sphere for this research was due to several reasons including practicality and familiarity (discussed further under the interviewing bloc), and also because the focus of the research is specifically what people do on Facebook, rather than how people negotiate their identities in a more general sense. Offline observation therefore was not mandatory for answering the research questions of this thesis, however discussion with participants concerning broader experience, thought and opinion about their potentially problematic identities did heed useful insights. Deciding a methodology should always be based upon what is appropriate for the designated research questions. Therefore in an increasingly connected and online world studying social phenomena to its fullest possible extent requires research to move towards these multi-moded approaches and reflect what is becoming a common reality for many of the world's populace. As Hine stated over a decade ago, "ethnography of, in and through the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings" (Hine, 2000, p.63). Such a holistic approach is more important now than ever before.

Work by the aforementioned and particularly Sade-Beck are clear indications of how far Internet based research has progressed in what is a relatively short time period since, for example, Turkle's (1996) research on MUD users. Despite these efforts however online ethnography, or 'netnography' as it is also referred to still does not seem to have entirely 'caught up' with its offline equivalent. Therefore in conjunction with its theoretical aims this thesis will attempt at developing a strong methodological example of a sociological, ethnographic, online based, qualitative piece of research that encapsulates the 'everyday' experience. Again, whilst it is not denied that such pieces of work do exist, this does not negate further contribution. Furthermore, continuing and repeated research is more pertinent in a field where change occurs at a phenomenal rate; for this research the introduction of the timeline altered the 'shape' of the context being researched almost overnight. Whilst this is also possible in traditional ethnography and offline based research it is far more likely with research that is focused on a particular online phenomenon. Within a relatively short space of time the development and use of the Internet can alter dramatically and so researchers must not only be reflexive about themselves but towards the field itself and in turn how this affects our construction of 'reality'.

## **INTERVIEWING**

Having established a network within each of the case studies a series of interviews were conducted with a small selection of voluntary participants who were recruited through status updates and messages. The interviews were qualitative in nature, in-depth, and conducted through Facebook's private messaging service. Whilst the interviews were used here to explore and clarify events and issues that emerged during the participant observation part of the research this is not an attempt to directly match behaviour with talk, and find the 'truth', setting up these two factors up as dichotomous entities. Talk is action, it is performative, and it is indeed a method of impression management – "[t]aken-for-granted distinctions between talk and action are erroneous and irrelevant when one recognizes that talk is action" (Atkinson and Coffey, 2002: 813). Reflexively, everything that we say feeds back into our actions and the act of talk is an action in itself. In this case, the concern that is often overly present in discussions of interviews of whether or not the interviewee is telling the 'truth' or not is largely a non-issue, any discrepancies make interesting points of analysis.

## **QUALITATIVE AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING**

Qualitative interviews generally centre on meanings, and how respondents interpret their social world, expressed in their own words and manner and take on a conversation style form. The intention in this thesis with interviewing participants was to expand on and clarify points of interest that emerged during the observation period and allow individuals to give their own meanings and significance to the identity performance and management they engage in and the consequences of this. This is important in itself, as it makes analysis and interpretation of the phenomena in question more rich and also increases the validity of the research by providing a better overall 'picture' and not simply the researcher's own interpretation of events occurring during the initial observation. Further, the observation was conducted solely in an online environment; interviews will allow investigation into offline identity management, past experiences and future expectations. "Ethnography's lens is that of lived experience, set in an eternal present. The lens of the intensive interview is verbal-what people say and mean-but its temporal range is biographical, extending into

the past and the future” (Warren, 2002: 85). As a result of this, the interviewing element of the research extended the depth and quality of research in the way that “...the social interaction of the qualitative interview may unfold in unexpected ways” (Warren, 2002: 92). Areas of importance and significance that were unable to definitively reveal themselves during observation emerged and were made explicit in the responses of interviewees.

As mentioned above the researcher already has experience of being a long standing Facebook member, and of being a member of the Goth community. However it is, of course, not to be assumed that the researcher’s experience will be that of others, instead then in-depth interviews will be used to “explore or check... [the researcher’s] understandings to see if they are shared by other members or participants. Former or returning members can fruitfully use in-depth interviews to check, stimulate, or inspire their own self-reflections...” (Johnson, 2002: 106). Taking opportunity of already being an existing member of a group facilitates the research in gaining access as they “already has a legitimate purpose for being there” (Adler and Adler, 2002: 527). Alongside the interviews the researcher also ceased to participate in their personal Facebook profile so as to be minimally influenced by the actions and connectivity occurring in that space. Furthermore although a member of the Goth community, this was increasingly more of a vague aesthetic attachment, active participation had been weak for a number of years, meaning that although there was a recognisability there was minimal vested interest in presenting Goths in a particular way.

In-depth interviews were also taken as an appropriate accompanying method as they are equipped to “uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary review or reflection” (Johnson, 2002: 106). The aim of this thesis is to explore a phenomenon that is a largely taken for granted, everyday activity for many people, and which has only recently started to be taken seriously by many academics. Further to this, identity and impression management work are often implicit hidden features of social life and interaction, and the actions within them are often performed without conscious reflection. Whilst Facebook provides a unique space in which to see identity work at play, it does not however provide an explanation behind the actions, which may be contrary to general assumption.

Consideration needs to be given to the fact that each interviewee, as an individual, is likely to respond and engage with the researcher in different ways and see the interviewing process itself differently as well in terms of their expectations of the researcher, the interviews, the direction of discussion and so on. The criteria for a 'good' interviewee, will be knowledgeable through recent experience about the subject matter and be able to provide thick description, without being overly analytical about what they are describing (Johnson, 2002: 110-11). The most difficult case study to gain interviews in was the eating disorder case study. This is unsurprising as "[d]epending upon their needs for secrecy or privacy, their fear of detection, and a host of other factors, individuals may want to guard themselves from talking to researchers..." (Adler and Adler, 2002: 518). Whilst distant observation was tolerated with little issue, the more direct and personal nature of the interview required the researcher to give much more reassurance surrounding confidentiality and the use of interview data. However after further explanation most were comfortable with participating in the interview.

The initial reluctance however did mean that a more direct approach was required for recruiting participants, and more were gained through personal messages than the other case studies. The vast majority of these were female, mostly because there were very few male participants in the case study in general, and only two who were frequently active on Facebook. However having similar demographics can also encourage potentially reluctant interviewees to be more open with the interviewer, as it provides a point of connection between them (Weiss, 1994). The researcher was also of a similar age, although in most cases a few years older, which may have also aided in gaining the trust of participants.

With this thesis, not only are personal details being discussed on an individual's identity, their friendships and also their claims to be recognised, which is often an area associated with strong emotions, but also participants will have been engaged with on the basis of a part of their identity being potentially problematic, or at least requiring more identity work than more conventional identities, which increases their vulnerability. "Emotional costs are particularly relevant in qualitative interviewing because of its open-ended, exploratory

character; probing for details and depths of experiences... can be stressful for all participants" (Warren, 2002: 86). It was impossible to completely eradicate the potential of emotional harm for participants due to the great difficulty in judging in the early stages of the interview the way interviewees would react to questions linked to quite personal and perhaps private and secret areas of their lives, despite it being made clear that these would be a part of the interview. Also without facial and bodily cues instead attention had to be paid to the language used and the length in the time taken between responses that may signal the respondent is distressed or perhaps is unhappy with the interviewing process and attempt to remedy this through talking with the interviewee and also reiterating that they may withdraw from the research at any time (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 618).

As Adler and Adler (2002, p. 526) state, researchers gain "a greater likelihood of securing interviews if they take the time to get to know the people they are studying, to develop relationships with them, and to build trust between respondents and themselves...". Ordinarily, that is, in the offline this would be of considerable importance, however the protection of a computer screen does seem to alleviate the necessity for intimate relationships to be formed in order to gain the best quality data. This is beneficial in an ethical sense as it reduces the forced need to develop a relationship for the sake of the research, and also in a practical sense as relationships do not happen overnight. Nevertheless it is still important "not to hurry respondents into interview situations prematurely" as doing so may risk losing the participant and their knowledge all together (Adler and Adler, 2002: 525).

Of course, the phrasing of questions in all interviews is important, however where the topics include sensitive elements, as they do in this thesis, the language used in the construction of questions becomes even more pertinent. For example, rape researchers have found that using the word rape itself often caused interviewees to become very reluctant and closed, whereas questions using the expressions, forced sex, or, unwanted sex, yielded much more open interaction (Adler and Adler, 2002: 529). Before commencing with interviews participants profiles were checked for the language they used when referring to their relevant identity. Again to use the eating disorder case study as an example, there were a variety of ways in which individuals referred to eating disorders and as will be seen in the analysis there is sometimes fierce debate

concerning appropriate labels and their connotations. Therefore it was important to ascertain what language was acceptable to each participant, and how the eating order was framed (often eating disorders are personified and seen as controlling entities outside of the individual) in order to avoid causing offence or angering the participant.

Conversely some interviewees took advantage of the interview process as a chance to disclose their thoughts and feelings in a more therapeutic manner, or in a way that would typically be done with a friend, seeking some form of intimacy with the researcher. In-depth interviews in general carry such issues with them, as “[t]o be effective and useful, in depth interviews develop and build on intimacy; in this respect they resemble the forms of talking one finds among close friends” (Johnson, 2002: 104). This was not a particular issue for the Goth case study, however it was in quite different ways for the remaining case studies. With eating disorders one participant was particularly keen to talk about their thoughts and the emotional side of living with an eating disorder to an almost desperate degree. It was difficult to gently steer the participant back on to the topic of identity and what they were doing on Facebook and responses were often erratic and rambling. Ultimately it was decided not to use the particular participant in the research at all as their ability to give informed consent was questionable. This was the most extreme incident however there were several less problematic instances where focus had to be sensitively regained onto identity management rather than the experience of having an eating disorder. With the fetish case study the interviews were sometimes problematic with male participants whereby too much attention was being placed on the researcher, and the interviews were used as a platform with which to flirt. Indeed throughout the fieldwork the researcher received random messages of a sexual nature from several participants which were simply ignored. Within the interview setting comments were generally ignored or met with a polite “thank you” before moving swiftly on, nothing gratuitous was said and so it was deemed unnecessary to take any particular action except to maintain focus on the interview topic and not given any form of encouragement. As a result however, some of the interviews were more formal in nature as the more relaxed and friendly manner typically taken in the other interviews was interpreted by the interviewees as some kind of reciprocation.

Given the nature of in-depth interviews and the case studies it was anticipated that distressing scenarios would be described in some detail, potentially placing an emotional strain on the researcher who is not trained as a psychotherapist or in any manner to deal with such scenarios (Ellis and Berger, 2002). Indeed some of what was witnessed during the observation and described during the interviews was at times upsetting and difficult to witness. However, conducting the interviews online prevented interviewees seeing or hearing the researcher's reaction and allowed the researcher time needed to recompose their self before continuing with the interview.

### **CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS ONLINE**

It was logical to conduct the interviews within the same setting as the observational element of the research, as this is where participants would be familiar with the researcher, and it allowed quick reference to specific profile content. Interviews were therefore completely text based in the form of an interrupted conversation as both participant and researcher were able to reply at their convenience. Not only did this take away the need for transcription, but also made it very simple for the researcher to 'go back' in the conversation and quickly identify what had been discussed, what areas may need to be covered in more detail, and demonstrate their "accountability to the data" (Seidman, 1991 in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 22). Where a fully transcribed, version of the entire interview exists without any omissions – something far less common in traditional face to face interviews – it means that the interviewee too also has instant access to should they want to recount something they have already said or "check for accuracy" (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 22). However the interrupted nature of the interview will eliminate the natural 'flow' found in face to face interviews.

Another problem with online interviewing is that if an interviewee stops responding, there is little the researcher can do. In face to face interviewing the presence of the interviewer encourages the participant to respond or notify the researcher that they no longer wish to participate, with online research participants have the freedom to simply disappear (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 56). However, ethically this is a positive

occurrence as it releases the participant from feeling social pressure to continue when they are not entirely comfortable in doing so or feeling as if they need to provide a 'good' reason for wishing to withdraw.

As with the observation, conducting the interviews online with the Facebook messaging system meant that the interview did not have to be arranged to take place in any particular place or strict length of time. "The virtuality of the medium offers unprecedented possibilities for extending the range of participants beyond those who are available for FTF [face to face] interviewing..." (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 606). After initiation, the interviewee will have the freedom to respond at a time that suits them, and the interview may span several days or even weeks so long as the interviewee has something more to say, relevant to the phenomena being researched of course, and data saturation has not been reached. Therefore giving participants who would usually find it difficult to make a face to face appointment, or generally be short of time to spare, the potential to incorporate the interview into their routine activities and from within their own homes or places of work (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 24). Minimal effort is required by the participant to 'attend' the interview and financial costs are reduced to nil which would normally hinder the scope of participants. The cost and time it takes to travel often results in a compromise as to where the interview takes place which may be an uncomfortable and unfamiliar environment for both interviewee and interviewer (Manna and Stewart, 2000: 21). This in itself widens the scope of who is able or willing to participate in the interview, reducing some sample bias, but so too does the ability to access people all over the world. In 2012 34.3% of the world's population had Internet access, equating to just over 2.4 billion people, and this figure is increasing year on year (Internet World Stats, 2012). Whilst participants still have to be found somewhere in cyberspace, and there will be language barriers and other issues that reduces this number, it is still a much larger population available than would be feasible in the offline.

This method of conducting interviews is also beneficial in that it removes the need for a digital recorder, as would be required in face to face interviews – which gives back to the researcher hours that would have been spent transcribing, and also means that no expense needs to be made on the buying of digital recording equipment and so on (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 21-22). With interviews conducted in purely text form, transcription bias is also avoided, which is caused when researchers paraphrase or summarise what

participants have said thereby substituting the “researcher’s consciousness for that of the participant” (Seidman, 1999 in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 22). Further “in one-to-one interview, problems of accent or lack of clarity can lead to delay or transcription mistakes” (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 22), the researcher in this case is particularly inept with understanding individuals with a considerable range of accents, therefore this is particularly useful. Also, having their conversations recorded will likely be a strange experience for many individuals, and in some cases interviewees offer the most interesting comments once the recorder has been turned off (Warren, 2002: 92). Although conversations were still recorded in a way, it is a text based method which individuals are used to in their everyday life and will not be as novel an experience as being interviewed face to face.

When conducting interviews online some of the dynamics of face to face interviewing are lost, and although technology such as Skype does allow for real time interviewing with a visual/video element, it is not exactly akin to being physically present (Sade-Beck, 2008, discusses this and similar problems with the online interview). However, the lack of visual cues is not necessarily a negative feature of online interviewing. We all give off unconscious signals during our interactions with others, in an interview setting this may influence interviewees to answer in a certain way or feel uncomfortable voicing their true thoughts based on the interviewer’s reaction to previous responses. With the fetish case study especially, it was difficult for the researcher to keep a straight face upon encountering some of the fetishes. Furthermore expression is not completely devoid on the Internet, individuals have developed unique ways of expressing tone of voice, laughter and feelings online with the use of text formatting and emoticons. Although of course these do not entirely appropriate the ‘real’ equivalents, they are nonetheless useful to individuals in ensuring others obtain the correct meaning from what they write.

However the lack of physical cues in online interviewing does require the interviewer to make explicit reassurances to the interviewee – “participants may need regular confirmation that they are communicating in appropriate ways, [and] that their contributions are valued” as they will not be receiving the subtle changes in tone, body language and facial expressions that would usually tell them this is the case even if not outwardly stated by the interviewer (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 617). Similarly the researcher needed to be show they

were 'listening' to what the interviewee was saying<sup>28</sup>. This can be achieved through "responding promptly to questions, overtly expressing an interest in particular points made, asking follow up questions, or perhaps enthusiastically sharing similar experiences to that described by the interviewee" (Hodkinson, 1999 in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 618). Although these guidelines are not particularly different to what needs to be considered and performed in face to face interviews anyway.

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<sup>28</sup> Listening is more problematic in real time chat, as pauses or silences, where the researcher, or indeed the participant, is stopping to think or read a response may be easily misinterpreted. This is a reason why a real time interviewing method was not selected here alongside in the inappropriateness of trying to use chat for an in-depth interview. Firstly, chats often have limited character numbers for each response that can be given, limiting answers, and also the slightly awkward 'silence' as responses are constructed and read. Real time chats are not particularly adept for online interviewing, either more traditional messaging or video calls should be used instead.

## **IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT, REFLEXIVITY AND DECEPTION**

The aim of observation generally is for the researcher to become familiar with a particular social world, to enable the researcher to see first-hand the lives of the participants, to see it from their perspective and to interpret and give meaning to experiences as they do (May, 2001: 153-4). Pierre Bourdieu argues that a researcher, or indeed anyone, cannot become immersed in such a world unless they actually practice the activities which that community experiences – he argues that only by altering your body to a specific social context you can come to understand that context (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 20). For this thesis, as a result the immersion in another social world is slightly different. It must be remembered that the concern of the thesis is identity management on Facebook, not immersion into the social world of Goths, fetishists or those with an eating disorder. So although these social worlds will be a part of the research, they are not the focus of it, and although some knowledge of the theoretical arguments surrounding these worlds is required, it is not the purpose of the research to attempt to understand these worlds in a large amount of depth. They are representatives for identity management and presentation of the self, and building blocks from which to explore the effect of social networking sites on these. Therefore the process of altering one's body to a social context, will involve the researcher being a member of Facebook and also engaging in their own impression management on each of the three profiles.

However, there was a distinct difference between the impression management engaged with by the participants and by the researcher. Participants were negotiating a number of audiences in the same space, and using their impression management accordingly. The researcher however used impression management to highlight and downplay or hide aspects of their own identities to cater for each specific case study, and therefore for a specific audience, which entailed impression management more akin to offline self presentation where audiences are largely kept separate.

This process required self reflexive analysis by the researcher, even down to the photo selected for each profile. What was presented by the researcher on each profile was always a presentation of self that remained true to 'who they are' as a person and as a researcher. Periodic announcements were made as

to the fact that they were a researcher and using the relative profile to conduct research. This became particularly important as the shift was made from participant observation to observation only, as it would be much easier to forget the researcher's presence and therefore not be adequately informed to be able to leave the research process. However deception is part of the way that each individual lives their life in their everyday experiences, the notion of impression management itself requires that this is the case. Sometimes this is a self-aware and conscious effort, in other cases it is less so. Participants too are likely to have been performing impression management that attempted to deceive or to hide particular aspects of themselves from the researcher, by blocking them from seeing certain status updates or images they did not want included in the research. This is all a part of the focus and main interest of this thesis.

Where the researcher employed impression management in the research that involved hiding a particular part of their identity, it was done so in order to protect the success of the research, and the researcher. No major issues arose with deception during the research however it was decided that should an issue be presented by a participant the researcher would be honest, but reserved with their responses. For example, one participant queried where the researcher lived, as they were in the Kent area also, to which the response was "about ten minutes from the city centre" which was detailed enough to be deemed a satisfactory answer but gave away no actual personal information. Conversely, the researcher engaged with impression management that also promoted and highlighted elements of their self in order to appear as a legitimate researcher and someone 'unthreatening' or at least sympathetic to each case study. There were some revelations that although may have been perhaps useful to some areas of the research, were considered to be too potentially problematic to the researcher in that they were elements of their identity that in their everyday impression management preferred to keep hidden from many of their audiences. Baring in mind that the research is part of a thesis to be reviewed by peers, colleagues, and so on and which is likely to be turned into one if not more publications at a later date, it was decided that making a feature of the identity traits directly on the profiles was not sufficiently helpful to the researcher to outweigh the potential backlash to the researcher. However, as stated above, if in the interviews the conversation swayed onto the

researcher's experience then honesty was upheld as a means of generating rapport and aiding the flow of the interview.

## THE X-FACTOR

Ethnographic methods are difficult to attribute particular rules and procedures to, as each scenario is likely to bring with it different experiences, different individuals and so on (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1-2). If the researcher cannot communicate adequately with participants, if they do not have the ability to form some form of relationship with them then they will simply not be able to immerse their selves to the relevant degree in the participants' social world and generate the data required for a good ethnographic piece of work (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 54, 56-59). Having not conducted a piece of ethnographic work before, it was a calculated risk to engage in such a long piece of ethnographic research. Although the researcher has a reasonably strong network and satisfying friendships in their own personal life, whether the skills that have led to the existence of these could be repeated in a research environment was not guaranteed. This issue was somewhat mitigated by the change from participant observation to observation only, but became more relevant again when it came to the interviews. However even without extensive interaction with the participants prior to interviewing the researcher had to come across as approachable but professional on the three different profiles in order to retain participants throughout the research process.

However, even with the best communication skills participants simply may not like the researcher and in turn not allow the researcher to become a part of their lives, even remotely. The process of immersion then is also dependent on individual participant's personalities, and the researcher them self will enjoy interaction with and find an affinity with some participants over others (Payne and Payne, 2004: 74). To begin with, a slight distaste towards someone may not pose a particularly significant problem, however over time the researcher may find particular participants intolerable and vice versa leading to a considerably depleted communication and interaction between the two, and dissolution of the participant's involvement in the research.

With the researcher potentially only developing connections with particular individuals, data may be skewed towards a particular type of individual and therefore weakening the representativeness of the research in terms of the population in question (Handwerker, 2001: 122). There is something of a difficulty in

ascertaining to what extent this occurred without asking directly, and even so the answers may be somewhat generic given that 'why did you add me/like me' is a slightly awkward question to ask. Instead the researcher attempted to be aware of the similarities and differences in participants that may affect the conclusions of the research. Using the different case studies to explore impression management on Facebook helped to alleviate this problem to a certain degree, as whilst there may be the occasional overlap, in general the different case studies should have encouraged a variety of individuals.

However within ethnography there may be a tendency for the researcher to empathise with particular groups in a community or population than others. Loic Wacquant's research, for example, on the boxing industry largely engaged with and therefore focused on the plight of the boxers, depicting the managers and trainers in a predominantly negative perspective as exploiters – they were not explicitly considered as also trying to escape the drudgery of the ghetto in the same way as the boxers were depicted (Wacquant, 1998: 1, 29). As an existing member of the Goth community it was anticipated there would be a bias towards this case study in terms of ease of recruiting participants, time and interest spent observing them and flow of interviews. However there did not appear to be any of these instances, if anything more time was spent on other case studies due to the researcher's general lack of knowledge and a desire to understand the different social worlds better.

Conversely, there was a significant problem with a fourth case study which was ultimately dropped as the researcher was unable to rectify the difficulties within it. This was a case study on BNP affiliates which quickly transformed into a case study of the far right, with members of violent groups present, and indeed those who identified with what may be called Neo-Nazis and generally engaged with extreme fascism. In hindsight a better control of the case study to only BNP affiliates may have allowed the researcher to overcome their distaste for the political views being put forward, and then have been incorporated into the research, particularly given that these issues are largely a result of presentations of the self that are in some way incompatible. There is arguably a wealth of information to be learnt about society and particular social worlds from people's negative reactions to one another and the process of not being accepted, as much as there is from positive interactions and acceptance (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 18). However this was

not done. The extreme views and sheer hatred being put forward were so disturbing and upsetting to the researcher that it became unbearable to witness them, which was significantly damaging the research process as a whole. The researcher ultimately decided that even though the focus of the thesis was on identity management, morally there was no space for the opinions being made within the far right case study in whatever form in this work.

## OUTLYING ETHICAL ISSUES

Consent issues are complicated with the observation element of the fieldwork, as with all ethnography, there were individuals who made appearances that could not be controlled for and unknowingly became part of the research, even if only for a relatively insignificant moment<sup>29</sup>. Rotman et al argue that this is exacerbated further with contemporary online research where due to the often extensive size of the research site the researcher will not be able to have the same “visibility” as in previous smaller online environments (Rotman, 2012, p.4-5). In any case, those for whom it was impractical to gain informed consent, identities and personal information were kept confidential as standard. Identifiable information has been kept to a minimum and attempted to be kept separate from any individuals it relates to (not, for example, identifying gender and age along with a status update), where direct quotations and screen shots have been used, pseudonyms replaced real names and direct consent was sought via a Facebook message. This was semi successful, whilst no one denied their profile content being used some simply did not respond. In these cases data was not used unless it was a particularly good example as consent had already been provided through the initial friending process and the secondary consent was more courtesy than ethical requirement. Those who agreed to participate in interviews were also sent an additional message where they were asked to read and then reply confirming that they understood what the interviews would be about, how their data would be used and their right to withdraw at any point.

Consent is also complicated by confusion about who owns the data. On Facebook there has recently been an ongoing debate between Facebook and its users about where and when Facebook becomes the owner of content posted on it. The most interesting example of the battle of ownership comes with the fact that an individual may only deactivate their account, meaning that Facebook retains all of their information, photos and so on if the user does not delete all of it prior to deactivation. However, there is something which seems slightly bizarre if Facebook is the official owner of any content posted, in asking the owners of Facebook for

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<sup>29</sup> Those under the age of sixteen were not used in the research, due to the standard ethical issues that come with having minors participate in research. However, some individuals do not list their birth date or they give a date that is quite obviously incorrect. Where there was ambiguity or it was strongly suspected the individual was much younger than their displayed age then no data was collected from them.

permission and give informed consent to Facebook in order to conduct any research. Ultimately, despite technical ownership issues it seems more sensible and indeed more ethical to have sought consent and permission from the individuals who originally posted the data.

In order to create a profile on Facebook an email address must be provided, to maximise fraud prevention four new email addresses, with different email providers and each with different passwords were created. The passwords for each profile were also different from each other and also from those used for the email accounts. Should an outsider gain access to one account, which does happen on occasions, then the different emails and passwords will eliminate, as much as is possible, risk to any of the other accounts. Further each account was not linked to any of the others by for example appearing as a friend on the other profiles (this would also have been potentially detrimental to do so for the research aims in itself). This created eight passwords with numbers, lower case and upper case characters, which of course for security reasons were not stored in the browser memory. Instead they were stored on a word file which was contained in a password protected, hidden folder on a USB stick, that was kept with the researcher or in a locked drawer in their office. The information had to be stored somewhere as there was a high chance that the researcher would forget the other newly created passwords. Any participant data was also protected in the same way, including screen shots and quotations through to field notes any identifiable information was deleted immediately after it had been censored or otherwise altered from its original form.

The notion of privacy is also relevant when considering an issue that was mentioned earlier about the ability of the participant to disappear from the research, this was discussed in the context of interviewing, however it is also relevant for the participant observation element of the research. If a participant stops responding, or has not responded for quite some time, then follow up actions are permissible, however researchers must be wary that it does not become interpreted as an invasion of privacy or harassment (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 56). During interviewing, it was decided that if an initial more informal enquiry was not responded to within three working days a follow up message would be sent encouraging the participant to get in touch, discuss any problems, or let the researcher know why they no longer wish to participate. After this the researcher would not contact the participant any further if a response was not received, interpreting the silence as the

participant having no further interest in being part of the research. Originally, a similar step by step process would have been implemented for the participant observation element of the research where it was thought strong relationships would be built. However, as this was not the case the researcher simply ensured at the start of analysis that no data being used belonged to anyone who had removed themselves from the network.

There is a final, but very important ethical consideration the researcher was aware of throughout the research, especially with regard to the eating disorder case study. It was mentioned in the discussion of interviews earlier that the in-depth nature of them was likely to lead in many cases to the interviews taking on a somewhat intimate conversational form, akin to those that would occur between close friends. However, these two types of conversation are different in one very significant way - "when an in-depth interviewer talks to an informant, the goal is to collect data", meaning there is an ulterior motive for the researcher (Johnson, 2002: 104). The researcher is only engaging with the participant in the first place due to there being some research being conducted; it is highly unlikely that any relationship would have been formed otherwise. Although the participant may find comfort in or enjoy talking of their self and identity, they do not get to share in the potential future economic, prestige and social benefits (although of course these are not guaranteed) the researcher may receive (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 291-2).

On the whole, the research process and the use of participants then appear to constitute a very selfish and one sided relationship. This is not only a problem for this piece of research, but for all research, quantitative as well as qualitative, although the issue is more acute in qualitative research due to the level of intrusion into participant's lives, and the level of trust and intimacy that is created. There is no simple way to resolve this ethical dilemma. The British Sociological Association (BSA) dictates that in any piece of research, but particularly with qualitative methods, the researcher will enter into personal and moral relationships with participants, and as a result researchers have a responsibility to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of participants (British Sociological Association, 2002: 2)30. The researcher

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<sup>30</sup> The BSA draws heavily from the Social Research Association, the American Sociological Association and the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth, and so gives a fairly encompassing overview of the ethical guidelines within the social sciences, although it is still quite vague in terms of what exactly protecting participants involves.

attempted to ensure that participants were protected, given respect, and generally content and happy throughout the whole of the research experience with effort being made to ensure that the participant knows how much their assistance was appreciated through status updates and directly in the interviews.

This is why participants will be given the opportunity to read the thesis before final submission in order to give them the option of voicing any concerns they may have. The researcher must also be aware that the content of his or her report may affect the individuals that have been left behind, in particular “care should be taken not to compromise existing relationships within the research setting” (British Sociological Association, 2004: 4). As detailed, the researcher strove to achieve this through separating the case studies onto four different profiles, in order to minimise any potential conflict for participants. Care was also taken during the research process to keep interaction concerning case study topics to the researcher’s own profile which had very closed privacy settings.

# CASE STUDY: FETISHISM

## INTRODUCTION

The fetish case study is being set as the first of the analysis chapters as it had the widest array of identity management within it. To begin the main types of identity management engaged with by participants will be described, before moving on to discuss why the individual may choose one over another and finally what the consequences are for the development and meaning of the identity. This will be done using existing literature, where appropriate, on the use of the Internet for those with a fetish identity to qualify how Facebook is different, if it is at all, from other virtual spaces inhabited by this particular collective/community. This is necessary (and as such will be a format repeated for all three case studies) as the premise of this thesis is that through the technological and social expectation of having multiple audiences and the actuality of this, individuals are forced to undertake a special form of identity management not generally seen anywhere else. So not only does reviewing the existing literature give a better understanding of the case study topic, which is arguably needed to enable a more valid analysis, but specifically allows an assessment of the uniqueness (or not) of Facebook in comparison to other social spaces on the Internet, and indeed the offline. Furthermore as advocated by Boellestorf (2008) “[c]ontemporary understandings of ethnographic method presume historical and comparative perspectives”, a social phenomenon may not be fully understood unless some consideration is given to the context from which it was borne and in which it occurs (Boellestorf, 2008, p.5). For the same reasons some consideration will be given in the analyses to participant’s articulation of the performance of their identities outside of Facebook, to help contextualise and achieve a greater understanding of the Facebook self and the benefits and challenges it presents.

## WHATEVER: The Bold and Empty Hearted

i dunno. i dont see it as a problem. you know whatever. i can see why it might be a big deal for some. maybe i'm just not that into it.

Figure 2: screen shot from an interview explaining why the participant was able to display a fetish identity

The 'whatever' style of identity management was relatively uncommon in comparison to other forms, however occurred often enough to make its inclusion important. As can be seen with the use of "maybe i'm just not that into it" participants tended to use evasive modes of 'fighting back' (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972) and also provide justifications (Scott and Lyman, 1968) such as "I don't see it as a problem" that involved acceptance of the label but not the negative qualities attached to it. Individuals here predominantly claim not to care who knows about their fetish or fetishes, and do not have any special privacy controls in place in order to restrict certain people from viewing any fetish orientated content. Family members and other audiences (including colleagues) are present, so it is not the case that the individual may be bold only because they have been extremely selective about who is present. Specific fetish groups are joined and pages are liked, but this is situated amongst all other 'typical' profile content concerning interests and tastes that would be expected on any individual's profile.

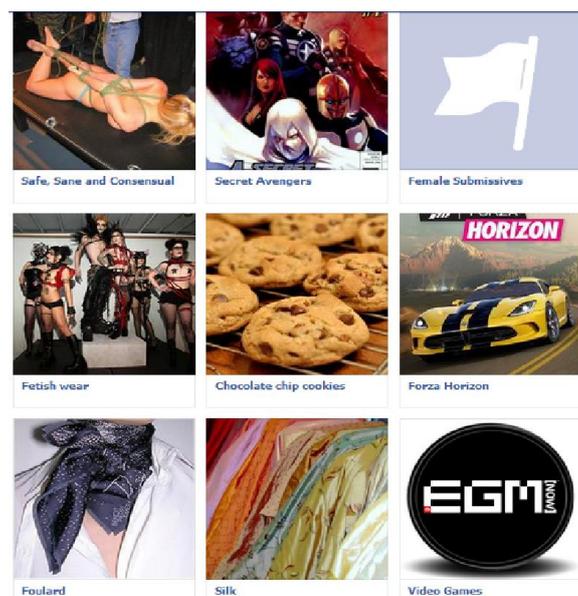


Figure 3: screenshot of a participant's 'likes' integrating fetish identity with a myriad of others

A feature is not made of the fetish, but it is very much present, it is treated more or less as any other element of the individual's identity. The fetish identity receives no special management despite its wider deviant or taboo status. One interviewee explains: "If they don't like it they know where to go... this is me, it's not like I'm doing anything wrong... I'm not shoving it in your face, if it's not your thing then don't look". Scott and Lyman's framing of 'justifications' is of use here, defined as when an individual accepts responsibility for the act, but "denies the pejorative quality associated with it" (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p.47). In this instance even turning the argument back onto 'others' by making their objection to the identity the problem, rather than the identity itself. However, this is somewhat oxymoronic, given the integrated nature of the fetish identities in this scenario, if audiences avoid that which they find uncomfortable or offensive then they by default also exclude the whole of the individual. Whatever decision the disagreeable audience makes, either sticking it out or averting their eyes, it does not bode well for the individual's claims to be recognised. Whilst there will be a select number of others throughout an individual's life who appear to accept them 'warts and all', for the most part it is acknowledged that performances must be audience specific and in some cases censored as iterated in the literature review previously. Not only does it create cause to question the legitimacy of previous performances, but however also illustrates a distinct lack of respect for the audiences present who are either offended or merely uncomfortable with the fetish identity being displayed. Indeed in any context, it is generally frowned upon for an individual to flaunt their sexual tastes and preferences too openly, let alone when that taste is something peculiar.

This may be a rather sexually frank and perhaps explicit profile here but I do carry my heart and sexuality on my sleeve. For me it's the preferred and only way to be. I don't want anyone thinking I'm just like other blokes, or I'm just like everyone else. Some people have to look deeply to know who someone is and how they tick, I'd like to zoom the microscope in a bit further that's all (careful, it's downright dirty in there. hee hee). Being an individual is very important to me and my sexuality is something that stands out. I won't lie I have dated Transgendered and intersexed women before, yet this still makes me straight. I adore women, after all, they are the most beautiful of all us earthlings. But that's just my opinion. Social Tolerance is also very close to my heart. I am very soft by nature, yet my blood is hot as a man's should be (my blood just boils at a slightly different temperature to most, in fact is actually simmers to a whole different tune entirely).

Figure 4: blurb from participant's about me section with an overtly sexual overtone

This somewhat brazen attitude towards impression management may be less problematic than it initially seems however, for two very different reasons. Firstly, quite often the fetish is only performed through a type of static visual representation and Facebook is not being used as a place to communicate with other likeminded individuals, or as a place to actively perform the identity, it appears primarily stagnant rather than emerging. For audiences then, even if they consider the identity inappropriate can for the most part ignore it as being either a faddish element of the past, or as an 'untrue' performance. This is providing however that there is no evidence of the identity being performed elsewhere within a recent timeframe. This is aided by the individual as well, as in *figure 2* where the participant claims they are probably "not that into it", it is feasible that the reason the identity is somewhat immobile is because it is not ranked very highly in the individual's prominence hierarchy. In fact the presentation of a fetish self is used more as a marker of being someone who is generally non-conformist, and does not adhere to society's usual airs and graces – it is part of a performance rather than being the performance. However, there is potentially a limit for every audience, even knowing the individual to be forth spoken and somewhat outlandish.

The second way in which participants may relatively safely engage with a public fetish identity is if the identity has already been introduced to the audiences present on Facebook, and it has been established that they accept if not understand or agree with the individual's engagement with a fetish self. In such cases the performance of a fetish identity was much more dynamic, status updates very clearly referenced an element of fetish identity, and so too did the events and subsequent locations of the individual.

A screenshot of a Facebook status update. The text of the update is: "One does not simply Watch Bondage porn. But when the model in question looks very much like an ex from back in 2011 one cannot help but gloat... just a little." Below the text are the interaction options: "Like · Comment · Share · 17 hours ago · [privacy icon]". At the bottom, there is a blue bar indicating "7 people like this." with a thumbs-up icon.

One does not simply Watch Bondage porn. But when the model in question looks very much like an ex from back in 2011 one cannot help but gloat... just a little.

Like · Comment · Share · 17 hours ago · [privacy icon]

7 people like this.

*Figure 5:* participant status update explicitly exemplifying sexuality and sexual achievement

In such cases however participants were much more sexually explicit, and had made being 'the one' who always had a sexual remark or innuendo to make a part of them more generally. The fetish identity then, although deviant, is seen almost comically, as part as of the overtly sexual character of the individual. It may in fact be highly ranked in the individual's prominence hierarchy, however its seriousness or importance is downplayed by the covering jovial context given through status updates such as those in *figure 5*. Again, as in the first scenario, the fetish identity is not necessarily taken as a performance in and of itself but as part of another more primary self. This is quite similar to 'channelling' discussed by Rogers and Buffalo, this 'fighting back' technique involves utilising "the label as a fulfilling means of self-expression, personal identity, and social effectiveness" where an "effort is made to translate a negative into a positive, a social liability into a socially constructive outlet" (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972, p.109). The individuals here openly identify with being kinky and having a fetish identity, and they are proud of it. The deviant fetish identity is manipulated into being representative of more positive identity characteristics, such as being free, tolerant, expressive, and so on. Yet at the same time the comedy which often accompanies more overt expressions of the fetish identity has been identified by Goffman (1975) as a particular form of distancing the self from a role – by making a joke of the situation the individual is declaring that they do not take the role seriously, they are merely playing the part, and the role is not an intrinsic part of them.

In this scenario identity management is being engaged with in a very clever way which allows the fetish identity to be portrayed to a fairly full extent, which will allow associated audience members to feel acknowledged, and also outside audience members to feel relatively comfortable. Importantly however there is a distinct lack of local integration, events and clubs attended are predominantly a significant distance (usually major cities such as London or Birmingham) from the individual, again creating an element of physical proximity which makes audiences more comfortable. It is much easier to brush off something which happens far away than on one's door step. There is also an apparent high number of friends, some of which are local to the individual, made up of work colleagues, family and friends who are very much not a feature in the fetish identity, and the rest who tend to be by general standards attractive people – giving the impression that the individual knows many glamorous others involved in the fetish lifestyle (given their non-appearance in

localised contexts). There is, at least in the West, a tendency to be more accepting of or endeared towards something where beauty is perceived within it, the association with beautiful people therefore may contribute to softening the negative impact of the deviant identity – if beautiful people are participating, it could place a question mark over how 'bad' the identity or role is<sup>31</sup>.

In summary, although participants advocate that they do not particularly care what audience member's reactions are, and seem to display their fetish identities without shame, they do in fact engage with some identity management. This is done either by making the identity a very static one, because it is not highly ranked in the individual's hierarchy and is only included as part of another more important element of self, or, where the identity is actionable and does have a notable ranking, disguising it through a related but more acceptable self with humour as an important tool. Both methods however require audience members to have a fairly well developed existing knowledge of the individual in order to achieve continued recognition, problems are most likely to occur where new audiences or audience members are introduced. It is common to add people on Facebook when they have only been known for a very brief amount of time, sometimes only for an evening, which does not allow sufficient time to 'know' someone. However this also in turn means that the individual is likely to be less concerned with receiving recognition from them, and indeed at such an early stage the loss of the 'friendship' will have minimal impact.

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<sup>31</sup> There is a phenomenal amount of research which points towards the success and advantages that come with being perceived as beautiful, and the almost universal application of this. Nancy Etcoff's (1999) "Survival of the Prettiest" is a, albeit highly controversial, popular example of this. A simple google search however will reveal linkages between beauty and success in politics, philanthropy, business, law and judicial processes, and even everyday interaction.

## THE RE-CENTRED SELF +1: The technologically savvy<sup>ii</sup>

Another frequent type of management is a rather more transitory expression of identity; it is not nearly as conspicuous as the aforementioned style of management and yet is not wholly secretive either. Individuals are active in their communication with others who share their fetish, and engage in an animated expression of the fetish identity. As previously, profiles contain a number of different audiences including family, work colleagues and fetish contacts; however there is a notable difference in who constitutes the fetish audience. There is a greater variation in the gender of the audience, tending to have more equal male to female ratios, as opposed to being dominated by attractive females, however the total number of contacts was on average much lower. Furthermore, the ages tended to be similar to the participants', and they resided within an at least reasonably close physical proximity of each other, although neither of these were exclusively the case. In essence, the fetish audiences were like all other audiences, a limited group of others who already had connections and relationships to the individual in the offline<sup>32</sup>.

Participants were able to successfully engage with their fetish audiences and other audiences simultaneously through the careful use of the semi-complex privacy controls Facebook provides to its members. The fetish audience was made into a separate category which was then given special access to status updates and photo albums concerning the fetish identity that could not be witnessed by other audiences. Furthermore, individuals turned on the tagging review feature so they could vet the posts others wished to display them in, this was articulated quite strongly as a precaution 'just in case' rather than an expectation and most individuals had never had to decline a tag based on the fetish identity<sup>33</sup>. As a general rule the fetish identity

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<sup>32</sup> There were instances of global connections, however these were confirmed as quite well established online relationships that were for the most part established on the fetish SNS FetLife. Interestingly participants reported that bringing the relationship onto Facebook was a significant marker of the meaningfulness of the relationship, in the absence of being able to move the friendship into the offline – it signified a mutual trust between the individuals by bringing each other into their 'everyday' networks rather the relationship being contained in an isolated fetish only set of connections (this will be discussed in more detail later).

<sup>33</sup> Actually, the cases where participants had felt the need to decline a tag from showing on their profile were from past identities where the individuals were considerably younger and using the words of one participant "foolish". This tended to be for a combination of factors, either because the behaviour depicted was considered inappropriate for colleagues and weaker

did not appear anywhere else on the profile, it was not entered in the 'about me' section nor as part of the interests and any groups joined were hidden from view using Facebook's privacy settings. Therefore to anyone outside of the fetish audience, the identity did not appear to exist and fetish audience members simply blended in with the other audiences with a great deal of ease and it seemed with little likelihood of repercussion. This is a form of information management or as Goffman (1963) refers to it information control, through selective disclosure and selective integration of those 'in the know' individuals were able to manage both worlds within close proximity of each other. In the same way that Goffman's (1963, p.121) mental patients engaged in tactful exchanges if they met post-treatment and adhered to an unwritten code not to reveal the other's stigmatising association, fetish audiences members mutually aided each other in retaining their secret. Goffman's (1963, p.125) covering is also relevant here, through successful information control individuals "who are ready to admit possession of a stigma" are able to prevent the stigma from "looming large".

Fetish audience members were able to disseminate amongst all other contacts as they too predominantly did not have any fetish content on their profiles accessible to all, and whilst many, like the participants themselves, were more 'alternative' in their appearance there was no fetish specific aesthetic displayed. Participants who engaged with this form of identity management tended to be on average older than those in the previous section, quite often in long term romantic relationships and not only appeared to have generally strong network links and relationships but were well integrated within the fetish community in their local area. Despite hiding their fetish identity participants appeared to be much more 'settled' within their lives and confident with their sense of self. There was a tacit agreement between those with a fetish identity to aid each other in the covert presentation of their fetish selves that was born of a mutual trust and respect established through recognition of the legitimacy of the performance in other spheres. Rather than there be any animosity or feeling of rejection from audience members, there was instead understanding and complicity

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associations to see, or because the individual themselves found it too "cringey", or due to previous romantic relationships that had parted on ill terms being depicted in the tagged content.

without aggravation – it was accepted as being necessary and not taken as a reflection on the individual's commitment to the identity nor the performance's authenticity.

Through the careful use of privacy settings the fetish identity may be simultaneously performed and hidden within the same space (and indeed the same window), enabling the individual to satisfy all audiences present on their Facebook network and in turn maintaining faith in the authenticity of their performances, mutual trust and recognition. Being added to Facebook was a strong marker of trust and indication of the closeness of friendship between fetish individuals. Firstly, it was an indication that the individual considered the other a part of their life, not just their fetish life, as they were being visually situated amongst family and “vanilla” friendship groups and being integrated into the rather more mundane everyday happenings of the individual's world<sup>34</sup>. Secondly, it was an indication of a considerable amount of trust and respect as despite the most careful organisation of privacy controls a single misplaced comment could potentially destroy the individual's entire façade.

Claims for recognition of the fetish self did not *need* to be made, individuals seemed to gain a sufficient amount from their offline performances with their local fetish community and although many proclaimed they would like more time to meet with friends and indulge in their fetish identity through event attendance this was seen in much the same way as other non-fetish activities. Adulthood and the various responsibilities that came with it were seen as the problem, and not the fetish identity itself. Status posts concerning fetish matters were done so with a broader context or background to them than just the fetish self, and were considerably casual in their nature. The statements made were not particularly dramatic or spectacular in order to emphasise how ‘kinky’ the individual was to their audience, they were more or less representative of everyday life but with a fetish tone. The treatment of photos was as well very ‘normal’, albums of kink and fetish events were responded to in the same manner as any night out would be; compliments, quips, laughs, and reminiscing the course of the evening were all present in the photo comments. Indeed, reading the comments alone there would be little notion that the photos were of groups of mostly rubber clad and

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<sup>34</sup> Vanilla is the sometimes mocking term used by kinksters to describe people not part of or into any form of fetishism or kink related activities and stems from vanilla ice-cream being the an unadventurous and ‘safe’ flavour.

collared individuals, 'pups' roaming the floor and near naked men strung to metal structures something akin to climbing frames with glowing red derrieres proudly on show. The ordinary and subdued way in which the fetish identity was performed served to increase its authenticity, far more than the bolder and exuberant representations found in the previous form of identity management. Fetishism for the participants here was very much a way of living over and above being a form of sexuality.

Even in scenarios where the participant had disclosed their fetish life to select vanilla friends and family members, the privacy controls remained in place and these individuals were not given access to the fetish related content. The first reason for keeping the audiences separate was as a mark of respect as it was recognised that even though the identity had been disclosed it did not mean the other had any interest or desire to witness it on a continual basis. Participants articulated that after the initial confession of the identity, they entered a negotiated state of disclosure whereby they would refrain from discussing their fetish activities unless the other explicitly asked or it was otherwise of direct relevance. The reasoning behind doing so was not only to prevent any accidental offence being caused, or making the other uncomfortable, but also because individual's feared it would become boring, irritating or appear as though they were bragging about their alternative sexuality and lifestyle if they were seen to be speaking about it too often. One of the more articulate participants described it thusly:

"It's difficult, on the one hand this is our life so everything that we do is influenced by our D/s relationship. I suppose you could compare it to people who have children who feel the need to update every time their child takes a successful shit, to anyone else outside of the "I'M CRAZILY OBSESSED WITH MY CHILDREN" group it's unwanted information and it makes you wonder what would be left if the kids weren't there. I keep my kinky happenings behind a curtain because the only people who are remotely interested are behind the curtain with me and I have enough other things going on in my life that are more generally relatable to fill up the front stage of Facebook."

The theatrical references are interesting, and unsurprisingly bring Goffman to mind, although such an analogy is not typical in participants' accounts of their actions, the essence of what is and what is not appropriate for the majority versus the specific is generally consistent in the explanation of managing their identity using privacy settings to segregate their audiences. Whilst there is some acknowledgement of the wider deviant nature of the fetish identity, for the most part justification was framed around the anticipated reactions of those participants were close to. The only audience sometimes referred to as a whole that was taken into consideration was work colleagues, however even here the fetish identity itself was not articulated as being problematic, but rather more broadly the discussion of sex and otherwise personal lives being inappropriate for consumption by this audience. This was very much dependent on the closeness between the individual and this audience, which correlated somewhat with the extent to which individual's enjoyed their work, their hierarchal position and the numbers within the same position, plus the size of the business or company (with smaller numbers making more intimate groups). However this is not to say that participants were in denial about the deviant nature of their fetish identity, only that on its own was not necessarily a primary concern when making choices about what to display and to whom on Facebook.

In summary, participants engaged with a form of identity management that required careful use of privacy settings and producing content related to the fetish identity that was only viewable by those in their fetish audience, importantly without hiding the audience itself. The act of accepting another on to the individual's Facebook network who was linked to the fetish community was seen as a marker of trust, respect and signified a close bond between those involved. This was not only due to the in-group alignments as discussed by Goffman (1963), although the sharing of a fetish identity had brought these people together it was not by right of sharing this identity that they were then permitted to enter or at least be visible in wider elements of each other's lives. Although there was certainly the sense that participants felt they "naturally" belonged amongst the fetish group, there was not the accompanying denial of their "real" affiliation with other groups as Goffman (1963, p.137) describes. It was by virtue of sharing affiliation and attachment to other groups and situations that individuals welcomed select others with a fetish identity onto their Facebook

profiles – they were much more than fetishists and more often than not their engagements and activities together had nothing to do with the fetish scene or self at all.

Individuals who performed this style of identity management all had strong local community links within which to perform their fetish identity on a regular basis and had formed many friendships through this. On Facebook direct claims for recognition of the identity were reasonably low, and content posted seemed more to do with reinforcing friendship and community bonds through common experience than drawing focus on the individual. Shielding other audiences from fetish related content was not done directly due to the deviant nature of the identity and the fear that its revelation would be significantly detrimental to the individual, as there were a good proportion who had revealed the identity to some other audience members. Where this was the case there was instead consensus that the lifestyle in its everyday form would not be of interest to those who were not a part of it, and therefore who lacked the 'in-group' knowledge to find interest or amusement in certain power plays, failure to carry out certain tasks and so on. There was also recognition that intimate details were not appropriate for Facebook, in much the same way that discussion of sexual activities more generally are frowned upon within this context, and such content was not posted even to fetish audience members. There was however an interesting caveat to this in that participants would include certain activities, such as whipping, as inappropriate sexual content despite it not often being sexual in nature to them.

There was an acute awareness of the differences between what was normal in their world and what would be considered normal outside of it. Participants illustrated a quiet respect for other audiences by not forcing them to acknowledge or engage with the identity. Recognition of the identity was achieved to a satisfactory level elsewhere, negating the need to pursue it on Facebook as is the case seen elsewhere within this case study and outside of it. There were certainly strong elements present within the '+1' technique of Goffmans (1963, p.132-3) argument that stigmatised people simultaneously define themselves as "no different from any other human being" and also as essentially different. Goffman (1963, p.133) goes on to argue that this "basic self-contradiction" will lead individuals to "make some effort to find a way out of his [sic] dilemma", yet there was not any particular sense of a contradiction, a dilemma, or a problem to be solved. Participants

seemed reasonably content with being both 'normal' and 'different', and whilst it was conceded that theirs was a more exaggerated form of this being ordinary and extraordinary was regarded as nothing more than the reality of being. This certainly makes sense when considering the conditions of modern life outlined at the beginning of this thesis – the juggernaut of information, the rise of the individual; we are all negotiating such an existence to varying extents.

## **SECRET SEX: The Fragmented Self**

The final type of identity management to be discussed in detail here sees individuals with completely separate and secret profiles in order to express their fetish identity on Facebook. All contacts are fetish related, as is most user input profile content, from the about sections, to groups joined, photos uploaded and status updates. There is some non-fetish related material included when it comes to favourite music, films, books and similar, however overall the vast majority is fetish orientated. Privacy settings are constructed so that anyone not on the individual's network can only see the most minimal information possible. Names were sometimes obviously fetish related, however based on interview data were more often pseudonyms that appeared as possible real names. Profile photos were either of something entirely unrelated, an obscured photo of the individual or an image taken from elsewhere on the Internet related to the individual's fetish (feet, heels, rubber outfits and so on). Whilst on occasion some of these profiles appeared on the friends list of the individual's 'everyday' profile, ascertainable by matching friends only photos on the fetish profile with the profile photos of the other account, the majority seemed to be disconnected from any other profile associated with the individual. This style of management, resulting in the fragmented self, utilised the most extreme form of audience segregation as outlined by Goffman (1959). In order to protect the legitimacy and authenticity of other selves deemed to be incompatible with the fetish self, fetish audiences were kept at a remote distance from all others – indeed it seemed paramount for the majority of participants that no other audience came into contact with the fetish self. However, whilst Goffman argues that doing so also retains the legitimacy of the performance in question (and this is an intentional outcome), this appeared of little consequence for most of the participants here. The primary concern was keeping the fetish self hidden, rather than presenting a 'believable' fetish self and much of this seems to have to do with the focus on fetish identity as a sexuality rather than a lifestyle (the sexual nature of the identity will be discussed in further detail next). Participants were largely unattached to the members of their fetish audiences in that there was very little if any emotional investment in the connections, and again this seemed to stem from the emphasis on the identity as an isolated sexual identity. There is some reflection here of the findings by Humphreys

(1975) whereby the acts of his participants were done so for the sake of sexual gratification, there was little attachment or investment in the people who aided the achievement of this.

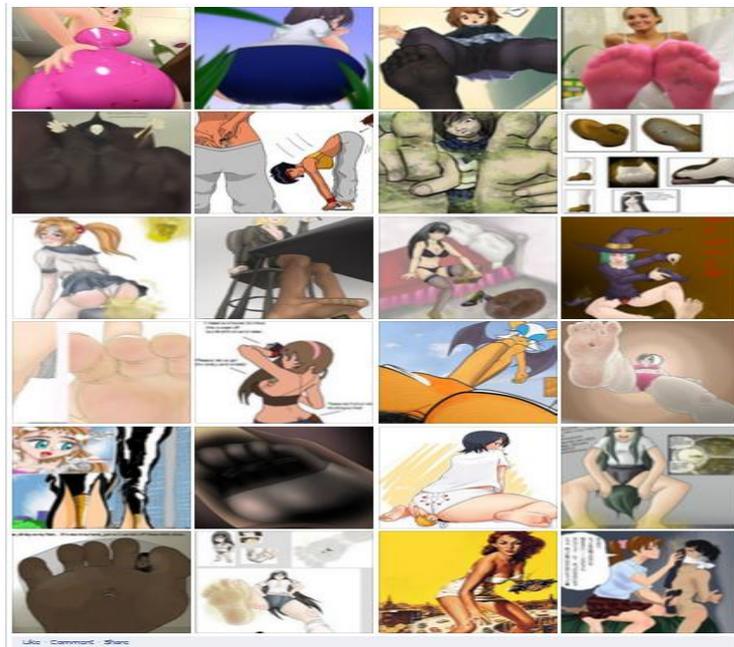


Figure 6: all photos contained on one participant's profile, all related to their fetishes (foot and giantess)

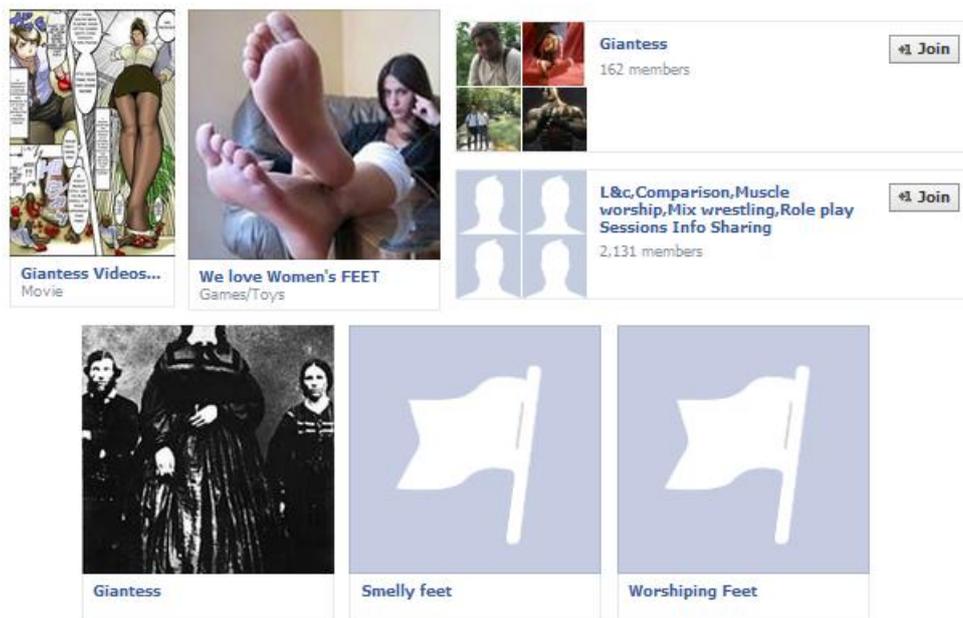


Figure 7: Same participant as Figure 6 examples of likes and groups again confined to fetish interests

The fetish identity supersedes all other identities, and with the highest security elements put in place it is in these secret profiles that the identity is played to its fullest extent. The main noticeable addition is the higher

levels of sexual content and actively seeking others to hook up with offline or engage in cybersex and other forms of sexual play online (usually on Skype or Yahoo messenger if not on Facebook itself). On numerous occasions invites to appear on webcam or exchange messages of a sexual nature were received during the research process. Although these would have provided evidence of the higher sexual content it was deemed unethical to include them as evidently the individuals involved did not fully understand that the profile was being used for research or what conducting the research actually entailed, instead the messages were deleted without response and the individual removed from the network. Presumably these individuals were sending others similar messages as well, however sexual content was generally reserved from 'about' sections and instead appeared in status updates and photo comments (which included photo titles on the individual's own profiles). Although sexual in nature the content was not necessarily gratuitous, it was more flirtatious and sexual through its links to the fetish identity at play.

Predominantly those that used this type of identity management in order to attempt to gain sexually based interaction with others were heterosexual males, however there were some female fetish models and Pro-Dommes who engaged with it on a professional basis and were therefore doing so in order to generate income. There were relatively few women who actively participated in seeking interaction of a sexual nature with others in a public manner, although any attention received from others was not necessarily unwelcomed. In all the profiles were relatively low in interactivity, a lot of posts were made and photos uploaded but these were not often graced with likes or comments from others. The profiles were generally very egocentric and extremely specialised. On occasion participants would be tagged in an image that was evidently not of them but depicted their fetish that presumably the other individual thought they would enjoy, however the act of tagging was not a very distinctive feature for those who had secret profiles.



Figure 8: Likes in the 'book' category, heavily weighted by sexualised images on women

It was difficult to gain any real in-depth interviews with participants who engaged with their fetish identity in this way, firstly as it is hypothesized that taking part in the interview bore no relation to the participants' intent on Facebook of sexual interaction and therefore the response rate was lower and secondly because those who did volunteer often had an ulterior motive. Nevertheless it was apparent from a combination of the interviews and observation of the locales of Facebook friends that predominantly participants had little and often no integration with their local fetish community or even with a wider fetish community as the previous two forms did. Facebook was their only connection to anyone else who shared their fetish identity, and offers an explanation to the totalising nature of the identity on their profiles and the highly frequent calls for others to interact with them however these were not generally claims for recognition. For all that the profiles were wholly consumed by the identity participants seemed to have little interest in attempting to legitimise their fetish identity in terms of knowledge and other forms of cultural capital that would be expected. The identity appeared as a purely sexual one however the need for it to be gratified was intense.



Figure 9: positive comments on a real photo compared to just 'likes' on those that are not of the profile holder



Figure 10: less interactive 'likes' on a photo taken from the Internet to represent fetish interests

During interviews participants unanimously expressed their desire to take the identity into the offline, however this did not necessarily include a desire to be integrated into the fetish community and focused more on having another individual with which to act out the fetish with but not necessarily within a romantic relationship. Participants here were vehement about wanting, or indeed needing, to live out their fetishes and fantasies, yet this was a very one dimensional presentation of the fetish identity in comparison to the performances and accounts resonate with the previous two management examples. When asked about attendance to fetish events or friendship groups participants tended to articulate negative experiences, feeling shunned or isolated and pointing to the fetish community as being “closed”, “insular” and “cliquey”. Whether participants had experienced genuine discrimination from the fetish community or it was rather a created

reality, community integration was not a viable option for the majority of participants who engaged with a fragmented expression of identity. The online enactment of the identity was the only, at least perceived, means through which the individual could express this element of self, however this appeared to be a largely unsatisfying, unsuccessful and unrewarding endeavour. FetLife was again mentioned in interviews, and it seemed that Facebook and FetLife were being used in the same fashion and also yielded similar levels of failures and successes. Requests to chat and role-play were visibly left unheeded on Facebook and participants confirmed that it was difficult to find women who were willing to engage with them based on their fetish without requiring payment for doing so.

There was however a tertiary group of individuals who had secret profiles but were well integrated within their local communities. Like those in the '+1' style of identity management the self presented was multi-dimensional, however due to the freedom afforded by the secret nature of the profile there were higher levels of fetish relevant content and there only appeared to be a single fetish audience present although this contained highly variant ties, from "randoms" (as phrased by one participant) through to close friends. In the initial observation period there were several of these types of profiles, however they became increasingly dormant as time went on, with FetLife again being given as a reason<sup>35</sup>. Technologically Facebook is better equipped to deal with deviant or taboo identities as it has higher levels of customisable privacy settings, however the lure of a community specific site and the familiarity that comes with it seems to supersede security concerns.

"I don't come on here much anymore not this account anyway. I check it for interesting stuff to ship over to fet but there isn't much going on here that really interests me. I've got my friends on fet or on my other facebook account, I keep randoms and people I

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<sup>35</sup> Since its launch in 2008 FetLife has slowly taken over many of the functions Facebook once provided for the fetish community as a safe place in which to perform the identity online. For those of whom fetishism is a lifestyle and therefore part of their everyday life, with an increasing transference and interconnectedness between the on- and offline it makes sense that individuals want to be able to perform their fetish identity online as well as the rest of their lives. In the absence of anything else and given the familiarity individuals tend to already have with Facebook it was the logical place to do this, however, FetLife's arrival has seen more individuals electing to perform their fetish identity in this space with Facebook's increasing regulation and FetLife's comparative freedom of photos and profile content being named as one reason, although irritation was expressed at FetLife's failure to be as interactive as Facebook with things such as photo and '@' tags.

don't have anywhere else on here but sometimes months will go by before I think to look..."

The descriptions of individuals' main Facebook profiles closely matched the characteristics of those from the '+1' style of identity management however with one distinct alteration in that the fetish audience was not given any special group arrangement. Participants articulated that they did not display their fetish identity on their main Facebook profiles in any form, although as previously they were content with having fetish associations on there whom they considered to be close friends that they trusted. Again, in these cases there was not a great need to display the fetish identity in order to gain recognition, but was moreover a pleasant bonus in the individuals' lives that helped to reaffirm existing recognition and relationships (albeit in this scenario through transference to alternative spaces such as FetLife). Having a secret profile on Facebook had become almost defunct for those with high community integration, opting instead to display the self on another integrated Facebook account, on FetLife a SNS specifically catered towards the fetish identity or a combination of the two.

To summarise, there was a large group of participants whose fetish Facebook profile was kept in secret enabled by strict privacy settings which only allowed access to a self-selected fetish audience and adaption of profile photos and names in order to disguise the true identity of the individual. For those who had little or no community integration profiles were extremely specialised and indeed very much represented Turkle's notion of the fragmented self as they were wholly disconnected from the individual's everyday life and other elements of self. More interesting is that the identities were also fragmented from within themselves presenting a highly sexualised performance that demonstrated only a very particular element of the fetish identity itself. Performance of this identity in the offline was seen as a desirable achievement however the fulfilment of this was not premised on community integration and rather focused on interaction with specific individuals for the purposes of sexual gratification. There was also a small cohort of participants who had secret profiles but were well integrated within their local fetish community, these participants articulated similar accounts of their fetish identity to those who engaged with the '+1' style of identity management, however were less dynamic in their performance of their fetish self on their secret and their main Facebook

profile, preferring to use alternative online platforms for this purpose. In either scenario however claims for recognition for the fetish identity were considerably low.

## LEGITIMISATION AND NORMALISATION

The different ways of managing a fetish identity, which in themselves are not always mutually exclusive, seem to normalise to varying extents and in different ways. When considering the 'Whatever' type of management, at face value, it would be easy to conclude that the fetish identity is at the very least considered legitimate by the individual performing it. However, the performance, although open, is quite static, and the fetish community, in any active sense, is almost always absent, suggesting individuals may not be as comfortable as they proclaim to be in displaying and performing their fetish identity. Whilst there is clear representation that the fetish is a part of the individual, there is no representation of that fetish being a necessarily active part of the self. The fetish identity is symbolic, the normalising aspect of it concerns alternative identities rather than the fetish identity itself.

With regards to the '+1' style of identity management the notion of a re-centred self becomes pertinent. We all perform different versions of the self on a day to day basis dependent on the context and who is present. None of these selves are necessarily 'less' representative of who we believe ourselves to be, but are always subtly and sometimes markedly different from each other. On Facebook, a rare environment where the varying nodes of our networks are simultaneously present, the individual has to make certain decisions about the self that they wish to display (re-centre it) in order to avoid creating tensions between the different social groups, and also most importantly between the individual and their social network. The consequences of getting it wrong can be quite serious – for example, the numerous cases represented in the media where individuals have lost employment and so on due to poor impression management on Facebook. Within the '+1' style of management individuals are engaging with the security controls and making conscious decisions about what and what not to put on their profiles in order to be able to display their fetish identity in the same place as they display all other elements of self, and be able to accommodate all in their social networks. The fetish identity is somewhat normalised as it is being included within the same space as other identities, all of which go through the same basic form of filtering and management. However, the fetish identity is given special treatment, and appears to go through a more intense and restrictive process than other identities.

Key to making sure all social groupings are content is to keep the fetish identity secret, or at least hide the full extent of it. The fetish identity is a 'normal' part of individual's lives in these cases however the identity is recognised as a deviant identity and participants were intelligently aware of this.

Finally, is the style of management that includes a wholly separate profile being used, which results in the presentation of a self denoted here as the fragmented self. Within the confines of the fetish specific profile, the fetish identity appears as perfectly legitimised and normalised, as that is the sole purpose of the profile – to be able to explore and perform that identity freely. However, the fetish profile is merely a small bubble, and when the individual logs out of that profile the bubble inevitably bursts as they return to the reality of a life that includes many other selves, responsibilities and performances that need to be tended to. Facebook provides an arena where they can actively tell their secrets to a wide audience of likeminded (at least in terms of being open about having a fetish, if not sharing the same fetish) others where they feel safe and comfortable to do so – whilst keeping the secret from their nearest and dearest. As one female participant explains:

“I'd still be the sister, the friend, the teacher and whatever they all know, because for me nothing would have changed. But for them, I don't think they would see the s+m as compatible with how they know me, because for them it's wrong and it's weird.”

It is evident from this and within the interview that she is incredibly concerned about her family and close friends discovering her secret. For her the only identity management that gives her enough security is to engage in a fragmentation of the self, where she wholly separates her fetish identity from any other element of her identity. On her fetish profile there are no details about her 'everyday life' either, it is as if they are lives lived by two separate people. This is relatable to Goffman (1963) and his conceptualisation of the double life whereby the individual moves “in two circles each of which is unaware that the other exists with its own and different biography of him” (Goffman, 1963, p. 98). However the difference here is that those within the fetish circle although they may not know the details of the individual's 'other life' will be aware that there

is more to the individual than the presented fetish self – if from nothing more than their own experience and knowledge of having a fetish identity. The quote above also illuminates Turner's (1972) argument that a deviant identity is, at least perceived as, a role and not merely an isolated behaviour; public reaction to a deviant identity or behaviour may be disproportionate due to the "fear that the detected behaviour is only the tip of an iceberg" (Turner, 1972, p.310).

Over all, it seems that the engagement of a fetish identity online, does not necessarily lead to individuals legitimising or normalising this element of self. Throughout all expressions, there is still a sense that they are engaging in a deviant or taboo activity, and that they are distinct from others in their want and need to engage in particular sexual activities. The practice of a fetish identity online and in social circles of likeminded people, only serves to normalise within that specific context and when the individual steps outside of that 'safe place' this process is reversed. In other words the prejudices and preconceived notions of what is seen as normal sexual practice, and therefore what is acceptable to perform and to speak about remains acutely more powerful than any intense clusters of identity performance online. Therefore the fetish identity, or at least the active nature of the identity, must remain a kept secret from an individual's broad social network.

## **THE DEVIANT LABEL AND INTENSIFIED IDENTITY ATTACHMENT**

Given the above, it is worth considering further the interaction between the labelling of fetish identity as deviant and how the identity is performed, and indeed the intensity to which it is performed – even if this primarily manifests within 'closed circles'. This is a question not only confined to a fetish identity but all taboo or deviant types of self, thus is applicable to all the Goth and eating disorder case studies, but in particular the latter. There is a huge wealth of literature on labelling theory and the self-fulfilling prophecy (too many to even attempt to cover in any adequate form here), however the example that comes from Paul Willis (1977) and 'the lads' mentioned in the literature review is quite pertinent, as are Albert Cohen (1955) and his delinquent boys. One reaction to the label of deviancy is to consciously play to that label and to perform the

stereotyped and expected identity that comes with it. Similar to 'the lads' in Willis' (1977) study, those with a fetish identity are aware of the labels being attached to them. 'The lads' made an active choice to behave 'badly' and not do their work, and so on, and in doing so took control of the label attached to them. The same was found by Cohen (1955) some twenty years previously, he observed that where young working males were unable to live up to middle class ideals they experienced "status frustration". The boys attempted to solve this frustration by engaging with what Cohen (1955) called the "delinquent subculture", a culture that intentionally countered that of the middle class and in which the boys could achieve an alternative form of status made possible by their collective adherence to it. A similar example is the way that certain derogatory words are appropriated by the groups they were originally used against, by reclaiming certain language they can be reinvented and used as a positive identity association (Haugan, 2003). The re-appropriation of stigmatising labels can have significantly positive effects for an individual's esteem and sense of self, firstly by enabling individuals to "deflect the sting" of negative feedback from others and secondly by reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness (and therefore group solidarity) (Galinsky et al, 2003, p.251).

Those within the fetish identity case study appeared to be behaving in similar ways. There was not any particular fight to be accepted as 'normal' and instead the label of being deviant and/or taboo was largely embraced and either broadly ignored or turned into something positive:

"It depends on how you say it I guess telling someone feet give you a boner might not get you anywhere but you know if you talk about how sensitive feet can be and like throw in some science bits about nerve endings or whatever then its still like odd to people but it brings out their curiosity as well"

"part of the kick is knowing you're going against the acceptable"

"That's what a fetish is all about isn't it? An inappropriate lust for something? ;)"

The above quotes appear from three separate interviews from each of the different types of profile, the first from a fragmented form of management, the second from the 'whatever' profile types and finally the latter

from the owner of a '+1' profile. Whilst the second quote has a certain air of bravado to it, all three, despite their differences in how to manage their fetish identity on Facebook articulate the 'taboo' nature of their identity, but not once did any participant state any psychological concerns for this part of them nor was its rejection from the majority of society of considerable concern. All three examples exemplify Goffman's (1963) 'in-group alignments' – identifying with others who share the stigmatising element of self and rejecting identification with wider society and its norms, and embracing the deviancy associated with the identity. However the first quotation also exhibits an attempt at making the deviant act more palatable to wider audiences – using 'softer', less graphic, descriptions and adding a rational or logical reasoning to its appeal. This seems to utilise a combination of the modes described by Rogers and Buffalo (1972); the first being channelling by attempting to spin a more positive description of the fetish with the intent of making it more appealing. The second form of fighting back is 'evasion', seen through the attempt to avoid the stigma altogether by rationalising the fetish (in this example calling to the biology of the body and the sensitivity of feet) and in turn neutralise the disapproval that it would ordinarily be met with. Yet there is also acknowledgement that this is not particularly effective as they concede that their fetish will still be seen as 'odd' – but neither does this seem to be of great concern so long as the fetish becomes a thing of interest rather than a thing of disdain.

The majority of existing literature on fetish identities and practices are heavily focused within the domain of psychology and psychiatry and seem near on determined to make having a fetish a mental illness stemming from some form of childhood trauma (for examples see: Wulff, 1946; Greenacre, 1953; Bak, 1953; Raymond, 1956). Darren Langdrige has documented the history of this process well and although specifically for sadomasochism, captures the feeling for fetishism and kink more generally in this summary:

"A considerable amount of the research conducted to date has started with the assumption of pathology, conflated consensual and non-consensual practices and focused almost exclusively on clinical cases. There is no doubt that the voices of the medical and legal professions have, for the last hundred years, drowned out the voices of those engaged in such practices and constructed a psycho-medical

SM subject that bears little relation to the people in SM communities engaged with these practices" (Langdrige, 2006, p.374).

Staci Newmahr (2008) also highlights the manner in which sadomasochism has been chastised within academic, so called scientific, literature and its refusal to entertain the *experience* of sadomasochism and the notion that science is not intrinsically value free. However, in line with the increasingly accepting societal attitude towards watered down versions of BDSM and kink (the word in itself is arguably a trivialisation of the fetish scene (Newmahr, 2008)), there is an increasing cohort of sociological literature on the subject.

Langdrige (2006) for example, considers the development of the sexual citizen, analysing the relationship between the personal and the public and the position of sadomasochism within this process, discussing mainstreaming, feminism, criminalisation, deviance, communities and other such sociological concepts<sup>36</sup>. Importantly, he highlights how the sadomasochistic sexuality follows a similar trajectory and treatment as other sexualities previously labelled as deviant and an indication of a disturbed psyche, such as homosexuality. There is then potentially a future for the fetishists where their kink no longer makes them deviant, just different, and certainly this is a point worth remembering when considering any identity labelled as deviant, problematic or stigmatised. In their analysis of the representation of BDSM in various forms of popular culture Harper and Yar (2011) explore similar themes to Langdrige (2006) and come to very similar conclusions despite the disparate research subjects (citizenship and cultural representation). The presence of consent within BDSM is found to be absent in its popular representations which Harper and Yar (2011) go on to argue works alongside medical and legal discourses to reinforce the deviance and criminality of those who practice BDSM. Yet they also note "the ways certain practitioners actively embrace the status and symbolism associated with deviance, as an integral element in the production of a desired social and sexual identity" (Harper and Yar, 2011, p.93). Harper and Yar (2011) also identify that whilst the mainstreaming of

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<sup>36</sup> Despite being orientated more towards public identity rather than personal many of his considerations are reflected in the current research. Of particular resonance is the manner in which claims for sexual citizenship are often accompanied by downplaying the sexual and transferring focus onto "relationships, often in a particularly conservative manner" (Langdrige, 2006, p.380). This could add further emphasis to the animosity between those who focus solely on the sexual gratification of their fetish and those who build communities and generating intimacy through their fetish; for the latter the former are seen as directly detrimental to their acceptance in civil society as well as a slight on their individual self.

'deviant' behaviour points towards its normalisation and acceptance (keeping in mind the skewed nature of its representation) this is not always entirely welcomed by those who practice it as the sense of otherness and strangeness is an integral part of their self-understanding. Being an oddity is part of the allure, and this was certainly iterated in the current research; the prospect that kink might not always be kinky is not necessarily pleasing to the fetishist.

Newmahr (2008 and 2010) gives a fascinating account of her journey into sadomasochism during a four year ethnographic study; beginning as a novice she entered the field with various presumptions about what to expect and how she would feel, especially as a feminist. Aside from her interesting personal story as an ethnographer, Newmahr (2008) gives illumination to the many positive benefits of engaging with sadomasochism that extends beyond the acts themselves and beyond the psychology of the individuals performing them. Many of those in her research articulated a long standing existence as an outsider in almost all facets of their lives, and someone who did not 'fit in' anywhere, until they entered the sadomasochistic scene. As stated in the literature review at the beginning of this thesis the need to belong is of fundamental importance for human beings in retaining and generating wellbeing, ontological security and a sense of self – to be recognised is a quest that arguably unites the whole of the human race. The community formed from a mutual (but varying) interest in sadomasochism offered a place for individuals to achieve this long awaited recognition and as one of Newmahr's participants described it have "a place to go" (Newmahr, 2008, p.632). Sociologically this is interesting, but psychologically this is essential, and is a direct challenge to the commonly pronounced pathology of the sadomasochist<sup>37</sup>. Whilst understanding the experience of being a sadomasochist was beyond the remit of this research, the positive articulation of fetishism, in whatever form it took for them, was a strong theme within many of the interviews. Of course

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<sup>37</sup>Newmahr (2010) also does much to dismantle the notion of sadomasochists as sexual tyrants, crazed by their own desire and with little regard for anyone else. She describes in great detail the care and time that is taken in ensuring equipment is safe and that the recipients of the act are comfortable and are in fact not hurt. During the upgrade presentation from Mphil to PhD the researcher here was strenuously warned about the dangers of engaging with fetishists and those who practiced BDSM, although protected by the screen the most unease felt was at the level of slightly 'creepy' but this was a tiny minority and certainly not worthy of fear. Indeed across the board regardless of the type of fetish and community integration participants were consistent in the importance of consent, re-establishing that consent on a regular basis, and not 'pushing' anyone beyond their emotional or physical limits.

some of this may be attributed to channelling, modification and other means of managing a stigmatising identity, but there was also a deep satisfaction and what surmounts to a great sense of peace gained from being part of a strong fetish community – as would be expected from any kind of community in which an individual felt they truly belonged.

The general consensus of the above four authors is that the representation of sadomasochism and BDSM within psychiatric, legal, political and cultural domains is fundamentally erroneous – it ignores core concepts within the practices such as consent and the individuals who practice and their lived experiences. As a result there is a failure to appreciate what individuals within fetish identities gain from having such an identity. Such a standpoint is also replicated in the work of Kleinplatz and Moser (2006) who offer contributions from a range of authors in sexology, psychology, sociology and medicine seeking to dispel the myths surrounding sadomasochism. Weinberg (2006) an author within this works has made substantial contributions in documenting the practice of sadomasochism since the 1980s, but more recently has offered a comprehensive review of the available sociological and social psychological literature. He makes the conclusion that “Contrary to the psychoanalytical view that SM is an individual psychopathology, sociological and social psychological studies see SM practitioners as emotionally and psychologically well balanced, generally comfortable with their sexual orientation, and socially well adjusted” (Weinberg, 2006, p.37). There is then a movement of change within some of the academic literature in its attitudes towards sadomasochism and similar sexually deviant identities, however as those discussed here have affirmed this has not shifted into the public domain – at least not in a way that constitutes an accurate portrayal of this type of self and lifestyle.

As stated above participants were concerned about the impact the revelation identity may have when it came to their close, personal ties, however the wider label of being deviant seemed of little concern to them. Indeed many made reference to their public attendance at ‘munches’<sup>38</sup>, and whilst the identity was not

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<sup>38</sup> Munches are day time events where members of local fetish communities meet and socialise, involving music and activities (sometimes fetish related, sometimes more general, from rope work classes to baking competitions) – it is an opportunity to

flaunted through particular aesthetics, strenuous attempts at hiding it were not made either. However, even if there is a positive appropriation of the sexual deviant label, this generally does not assist a change in the general public opinion, unless it is part of a wider group movement (Galinsky et al, 2003). If the story of 'the lads' is followed, on a semi-individual basis playing to the identity will only serve to reinforce stereotypes, to ostracise the community further, and allow the self-fulfilling prophecy to take place. As will be seen later this is affirmed by the eating disorder case study where public awareness has done little to accommodate understanding, and has forced those with an eating disorder/eating disorder identity to retreat further underground.

The use of channelling (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972) to fight back against the deviant label, that is the embracing and positive language used by individuals about their fetish and their attitudes towards the deviant label, is somewhat juxtaposed by the very real attempts to hide and conceal their fetish identity on their Facebook profiles and in the offline. Even accounting for the distinction between a wider public and their closest ties, it seemed apparent that there was an ideal of acceptance individuals wanted to adhere to, and seemed to achieve within their fetish 'bubble', but the potential confrontations in everyday life prevented the actuality of this truly taking place. Whilst fighting back techniques seem to be a substantive part of participants means of engaging with their fetish identities, when faced with the actuality of being 'found out' they are of little solace. One participant articulated her fear upon seeing her aunt in the bar she was attending a 'munch' at:

"My blood literally ran cold. I could have been there for anything and there was no way of telling but I knew why I was there and that was enough. I bolted upstairs and didn't dare go back to the bar. I don't know what I thought would happen, she's a nice person, whats the worst she could do?"

Such a description of an almost accidental revelation highlights the conflicts between public perceptions, the perception of closely tied others and in turn the individual's perception of them. Indeed for those who hid

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interact with others who share a fetish identity but not within an obviously fetish environment. For many this is a far less intimidating environment, and can be a less socially challenging situation in which to get to know people.

their fetish identity from their social network both on- and offline there was often a sense of guilt which stemmed from the compulsion to be honest with those who they loved and also because by not sharing their secret they were condemning their ties to be narrow minded, unsympathetic and even potentially vindictive. Whilst often articulated as a mark of respect for their friends and family, the choice to keep the fetish identity a secret seemed at times emotionally painful for participants – the relationships were of such substantial meaning to individuals that they could not take the risk of losing them, however it was precisely the importance of the relationships that generated the desire to disclose the identity. The literature on fetish identities argue higher levels of anxiety to be attributed to the fetish itself (for example, Bak, 1953), the above may proffer an alternative explanation for their anxiety – that being a sort of social guilt.

Through being segregated from mainstream society due to their sexual preferences it is argued that those with a fetish identity are pushed closer together and therefore the attachment to the identity is intensified as a result of being ostracised from the rest of society and finding commonality and mutual understanding with each other. This can be seen in even large marginalised groups such as the young working class males explored in the works of both Cohen (1955) and Willis (1977); where they find they are unable to pertain to the middle class values society prescribes they intentionally act in accordance with subversive values strengthened and enabled by their collective participation. Indeed Goffman (1963) has exemplified this point for any stigmatised, or spoiled, identity, particularly within his discussion of 'in-group alignments' utilised at several points in this chapter. Facebook provides those with a fetish identity an environment that can be made separate to the rest of the world. Individuals may interact with likeminded others in whatever manner they choose from the sexually explicit through to everyday banter. The labelling of certain fetishes as sexually deviant makes way for a group of people who are not necessarily emotionally close, but are bound together through the way they choose to express their sexuality that is not generally understood by those outside of the collective.

However this is not exactly the story the data here is telling. Those with high levels of community integration and practised their fetish or kink as a way of life often integrated their networks of fetish and non-fetish audiences on Facebook, even those who presented a fragmented form of self on Facebook (or had moved

on to FetLife) there was relatively little identification of feeling as if they had been 'shunned' by society and therefore being forced to go underground or hide in the shadows with their fetish. Participants reported attending various events during the day and the evening in public spaces as well as attending house parties (private and commercial) and themed club nights within their local area, or as near to it as was possible. The ability of individuals to do so is perhaps influenced by the increasing mainstreaming of BDSM and kink, at least in its milder forms. When there was recognition of hostility, for example, where events had been forced cease due to complaints, this was attributed to the character flaws of a few select individuals rather than the public as a whole – and indeed members of the 'in-group' were also accused of instigating shut downs due to personal feuds or rival events. Fetish communities were tight knit and protective of those within it, but this was orientated more against those with a fetish identity that were deemed undesirable or potentially problematic than at a wider public. One older male participant explains:

“...its definitely different now [than when he first joined the scene] better in many ways but there are a few too many who think its some sort of sex fest. I suppose we have that poxy book to thank for that. I think we are quite welcoming or at least try to be for people who are new as long as they are respectful. Respect is a big deal, you cant be in a community like this and not be respectful. When people dont respect others limits and the like it gets ugly and dangerous we dont have time for idiots who just want to get a cheap thrill”

He also went on to explain the difficulties of being a single older member of the community and the weariness of new younger community members, which although irritated by the assumption he was a “pervy old man” he understood the anxiety younger people faced starting out on their “kinky journey” and entering a fairly well established group of people which would be intimidating in any scenario. The emphasis on local fetish communities being welcoming but cautious when it came new people was a common theme in interviews, and indeed the targets of animosity seemed to generally fit the characteristics of those described in the ‘fragmented’ form of identity who engaged with a fetish almost purely for the sake of sexual gratification. In his discussion of ambivalence Goffman’s (1963) asserts that: “[t]he stigmatized individual

exhibits a tendency to stratify his 'own' according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive. He can then take up in regard to those more evidently stigmatised than himself the attitudes the normal take to him" (Goffman, 1963, p.130-1). This is akin to the attitudes and seeming rivalry between those who were interested only in the sexual gratification and sexual content of a fetish verses those who constructed the fetish identity as a lifestyle and emphasised community, friendships and romantic relationships within it. Although in the above quotation the two are combined as a common enemy often those who entered the fetish scene due to its mainstream representations were met with rejection not because they were seen as more obviously stigmatised by being overly sexualised, but because they lacked the necessary subcultural capital to be deemed 'true' fetishists – if anything they were not deviant enough. Younger members of the fetish scene were forgiven naivety however so long as they appeared to be willing to learn and to make an effort in furthering their knowledge and understanding, of fetishism as a whole, but also of the 'norms' of their particular local scene.

Overall attachment to the identity seemed to be affected very little by the extent to which individuals felt ostracised or condemned by society or the population of their local area, instead it was the sense of belonging that coincided with being an active member of a local community that correlated with a stronger sense of identity attachment. Such attachment was evidenced by the need to give the identity special treatment in comparison to other identities, the closeness of ties that the individuals had developed with others from their local fetish community (and some further afield) and also the way in which the identity was regarded as a way of life. Even those with strong attachment to the sexual element of the identity seemed to have so not due to public scrutiny but if anything because of the rejection of the fetish community and a lack of resources to find gratification elsewhere (paying money for services being the only other likely option). This certainly could create a level of anxiety as reflective in the psychological literature on fetish identities, and certainly it could be said that existing literature in this field tends to focus on individuals for whom the fetish identity has become a problem (as much as any unsatisfied element of self can) rather than the population as a whole.

## FETISH ON FACEBOOK AND THE KINKY SELF: A Summary

The fetish case study revealed the most variant range of managing the self on Facebook, which largely fell into three different styles, bearing in mind of course no qualitative analysis can take account of all nuances encountered. The 'whatever' style of self on Facebook was lackadaisical and seemed more about presenting a certain attitude rather than there being any real investment in the fetish identity itself. Secondly was a self that was akin to the notion of a re-centred self, but with restrictions, referred to here as '+1'. This identity management involved the blending of an individual's audiences, however fetish content was not made generally viewable and members of the fetish audience were given special access to fetish content as well as the individual's general Facebook activities. Members of the fetish audience were close ties who the individual was very confident they could trust, and when privacy settings were used, such as restricting automatic tagging, these were articulated as sensible precautions rather than strong concerns their audience would 'out' them. Finally was the fragmented style of identity management which involved individuals with completely separate and closed profiles, strictly for the performance of the fetish identity, almost unequivocally content and audience members were fetish orientated. The fetish identity was for the most part a fractured form of itself in comparison to the '+1' style of management with a very strong emphasis on sexual gratification, content was not necessarily gratuitous but there was little depth apparent in the performance of the identity, essentially boiling down to 'getting laid' (and on the odd occasion getting paid!).

There are two broad management techniques being utilised by participants here that have been outlined by Goffman (1975 and 1959 respectively) for successful performance management. In the first instance is role distancing, practiced by those within the 'whatever' style of self through a generally blasé attitude towards the identity and the use of humour as deflection when direct references were made to it. Secondly was audience segregation, most obvious in the fragmented self where participants completely isolated their fetish audience by creating a separate profile that was (almost always) private or otherwise unrecognisable to members of any other audience. In the instance of the '+1' self, the audience segregation was rather more sophisticated as fetish and other audiences co-existed on the same profile. This was enabled through an unwritten code generated by mutual trust (and therefore recognition) not to reveal each other's stigmatising identity, and

aided through the technological possibility on Facebook of isolating particular content to certain audiences. In essence it was audience segregation with information control as its proxy (Goffman, 1963), and whilst this is achievable in the offline the design of Facebook allowed it to be an everyday possibility with relatively little effort (and as far as the participants here were concerned, a consistent success for their impression management).

# CASE STUDY: EATING DISORDERS

## INTRODUCTION

The eating disorder case study is both a simple and complex one to explore. In terms of the type of impression management engaged with it is considerably simpler as there was predominantly only one manner in which those with this identity association displayed it on Facebook. However in terms of the meaning of such a self on Facebook and the implications of the performance of this self there are many considerations to be made. Throughout this analysis there will be an in-depth discussion of the existing literature on the presentation of an eating disorder identity online and a comparison made to the use of Facebook. First this analysis will consider how this particular community of people come to exist on Facebook, followed by a consideration of what having an eating disorder identity actually means. Third the nature of the eating disorder identity will be discussed along with a description of the type of impression management engaged with on Facebook, with the related topic of embodiment following this. Finally the nature of support will be given more specific attention as it is a theme that appears though out the course of the analysis, and certainly was a key feature of the relationships formed on Facebook between those with eating disorder identities. Careful attention is being paid to existing literature in this case study due to there being direct health related problems and complications through its performance, with far reaching implications for the participants' lives (and in some cases the end of them). The use of the label eating disorder identity seemed the most appropriate terminology to use, as this is consistent with other analyses but also reflects the myriad of different associations witnessed in the case study. Such associations not only concern the type of eating or body-dysmorphic disorder, but also the vast spectrum of 'recovery' individuals were in, or indeed, in all too many cases very far from.

## DISAPPROVE AND DELETE

Although not the focus of this analysis, it is worth considering public perception and the resultant treatment of pro-eating disorder websites and communities, and as a point to contextualise the analysis of participant's Facebook profiles. It is evident from the research that misunderstanding from those outside of the group in question is a common concern of those within it, although this is primarily situated within their close ties (and at that most vehemently regarding family members) the general principles are still applicable. This incomprehension is not necessarily intentional (from a reluctance to see the world differently) nor meant with any malice. The general public often seem to believe they are being helpful and are defending people's rights to be protected from harm – however, often neglecting to actually speak to the community which they argue they are trying to help. The way that pro-eating disorder websites are dealt with is an excellent example of this. In 2001, the existence of pro-eating disorder websites became a point of media, public and professional concern, and major server hosts such as Yahoo began deleting such websites (Shade, 2003). In retaliation the pro-eating disorder community was forced to go 'underground' (Martin, 2005, p.160). Subsequently "...setting up new sites with other ISPs, often heavily disguised by avoiding terms like "ana" and "anorexia" altogether, or by issuing prominent disclaimers on their homepages arguing that they are *not* encouraging people to starve or that they are celebrating the anorexic lifestyle" (Brotsky and Giles, 2007, p.95).

This kind of response is mirrored on Facebook. When the research first began it was quickly realised that there had been a recent mass deletion of what were considered pro-eating disorder pages and groups. Evident through the descriptions in info sections on the groups which explicitly stated that this had actually happened, but also from conversations occurring between members – who were, of course, angry that communities they had put so much time and effort into had been deleted without prior warning and without explanation, although everyone knew it was because of the 'pro' status attributed to their particular creation. The groups however were still quite simple to find, there seems to be less of an element of becoming more secretive, and more a determination and blind stubbornness to keep re-creating and building pages and

groups over and over. Again, evident on information pages, that have motivational quips and statements, almost akin to that you would hear cried during a period of war. There is a strong defiance against being silenced and controlled by powers that are seen to be out of touch with the community in question.

The issue with this policing method of disapprove and delete, is that it does not help to solve the problem of eating disorders. Such censorship not only drives communities underground, making them impossible to monitor, but reinforces the bond between individuals and confirms the notion that the outside world does not understand, and is unwilling to listen. Conversely this is likely to further participation in pro-eating disorder communities and the ferociousness with which members believe in them and will fight for their right and freedom to express their eating disorder identity. Giles summarises this well:

“In many respects, the community is defined in adversity: when a ‘hater’ breaks through on to a discussion forum and posts a savage attack on the pro-ana position, or when a site is shut down by gatekeepers, each perceived slight seems to strengthen the resistance of the users and to foster the sense of shared goals and beliefs” (Giles, 2006, p.464).

This kind of ‘imposter’ related reaction is not particularly present in the current research, likely due to the fact that these are individual’s private profiles and who is granted access is more easily managed than on pro-eating disorder websites. Nevertheless participants often articulated their isolation and segregation from society in quite direct and intentional terms. This is very much like Howard Becker’s (1963) discussion of musicians where he states that “[d]ifficulties with squares lead to increasing isolation which in turn increase the possibilities of further difficulties” (Becker, 1963, p.96). This generates a cyclical process in which the marginalised group and society become increasingly distant from each other, making any conciliation between the two less and less likely. Becker (1963) argued that the musicians made a point of distinguishing themselves from the rest of society through self-segregation, that is, an intended segregation as a direct result of particular collectively adhered to actions. Symbolic expressions played an important role in this; certain ‘slang’ was created either by altering the meanings of words (for the musicians, ‘square’ to mean

'uncool') or using alternative expressions for common phrases ('loot' instead of 'money') (Becker, 1963). The manipulation of language by those with an eating disorder identity was a common occurrence, and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Moore (2001) adds further evidence to the idea that condemnation is not an efficient means of 'controlling' the eating disorder community, finding that after instances of negative press coverage concerning pro-eating disorder sites, the activity on such sites increased significantly. In part this may be due to already existing community members becoming more active in light of the spotlight being thrown upon them, which counters the intention of negative public reaction in itself. Further, it also implies that non-community members are actively seeking out the sites, and therefore greater numbers of people are being exposed to content that is considered potentially harmful (Moore, 2001 cited in Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006). Further in a study by Csipke and Horne (2007, p.199-200) 36% of respondents visiting pro-eating disorder sites found the sites through search engines, but this was almost matched by 34% finding the sites having heard about them in the media.

Public concern may be based on genuine reasons, however the reasoning is derived from misinformation from media sources and hype. The community in question are rarely given a direct voice, and if used at all data from research is selectively presented to depict a wholly negative image of pro-eating disorder websites. In actuality results within and between studies often appear to be inconclusive and also contradictory. Bardone-Cone and Cass (2007) present one of the only pieces of research to illustrate definite negative effects of pro-eating disorder sites. They created three websites, one pro-eating disorder website, one focused on the female figure as a fashion site, and the other an unrelated home decor site, giving participants a questionnaire pre- and post- viewing their designated site. The pro-eating disorder website had significant negative effects in comparison to the other two sites. However the participants used were females who, although statistically some may have had an eating disorder identity, would not have typically come into contact with or had need to use a pro-eating disorder site. As a result, validity here can be questioned – for

an individual unaccustomed to the eating disorder way of life, experiencing it, even virtually, may have a more significant effect than for someone who is already entwined in that world in their everyday life.

A core component of pro-eating disorder websites, and indeed the element that often receives the most attention is the sharing of tips and techniques. This involves the sharing of day to day diet successes and failures and how these were achieved, with calorie counting – both consumed and burned – and other aids, such as diet pills, being dominant (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.288). Weight targets, body shape and body size, also feature within these discussions, and often appear as internal dialogues “held with themselves to make sense of feelings about the extent to which they were in ‘control’ and being ‘honest’ with themselves” (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.289). Norris et al (2006) analysed 445 eating disorder websites and discovered that 67% had tips content on them. Further Wilson et al found that “[w]hen visiting Pro-ED sites, 96.0% (*n* \_ 24) learned new weight loss or purging methods; 64.0% (*n* \_ 16) learned about diet pills, laxatives, or supplements; and 69.2% (*n* \_ 18) reported using new weight loss or purging methods as a result of visiting Pro-ED sites” (Wilson et al, 2006, p.1639). Public perception of the potential danger of pro-eating disorder communities online then is not ungrounded. However, these kinds of statistics must be treated with caution:

“Pro-recovery site users also reported learning high-risk eating behaviors online, with nearly half reporting that they learned new methods of weight loss or purging at pro-recovery sites (*n* \_ 13 [46.4%]) and a smaller percentage learning of new diet aids (ie, pills, laxatives, or supplements; *n* \_ 11 [39.3%]) and how to obtain them (*n* \_ 5 [17.9%]).” (Wilson et al, 2006, p.1639).

Although pro-recovery websites present considerably lower percentages than pro-eating disorder sites, given that the aim is recovery and to halt the furtherance of the eating disorder these numbers seem to be quite high. Further the realness of living with an eating disorder identity must not be forgotten within these arguments. Speaking strictly about anorexia Mulveen and Hepworth (2006, p.292) argue that “anorexia seemed to function as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional pressures and stress”. Lyons et al confirm this stating that “proanorexics’ language use hints at a coping strategy aimed at stabilizing them emotionally”

(Lyons et al, 2006, p.256). Ana is often referred to as both friend and foe, and the line between the two is often fine and blurred, "suggesting that no matter how strong the apparent need for anorexia, having anorexia was never experienced as being completely positive" (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.293). Involvement in pro-eating disorder sites is "multi-purpose, commonly providing a coping function in relation to extreme weight loss, and a place to manage the related emotional burden" (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.294)

Csipke and Horne (2007, p.200) found that overall, with those with an eating disorder identity who visited pro-eating disorder sites regularly, perceived greater positive effects from such communities than those who visited less often, but did not in concurrence also perceive greater negative effects than those who visited the sites less frequently. They found that 45% frequently used forums/chatrooms and 34% never/hardly ever used them with the more active users reporting greater self-esteem from being on the site than the more inactive users. Interestingly in terms of negative eating disorder behaviours, they found differences to be predominantly negligible. Content concerning dieting advice and information was largely absent from the profiles on Facebook, any information of this kind was by proxy through an individual stating their achievements that week and how they achieved them. Personal profiles are in their very definition ego centric and therefore it is of no surprise that such content was not present during the research.

To contextualise the 'disapprove and delete' method as engaged with by Facebook several participants reported that they had given up attempting to visit many eating disorder websites both pro and recovery due to the likelihood of the sites and forums being deleted, and also, as one participant put it "who does that now anyways?". Facebook was a convenient platform in which to move their eating disorder identities as they were familiar with the style and layout, could have their own personal space opposed to attempting to keep up with various chatrooms and forums, and of most importance were able to create their own networks of likeminded others. Even though Facebook periodically had a cull of groups and pages determined to be pro-eating disorder rather than recovery, individual profiles were typically left alone meaning that individuals retained their Facebook friendships which were of the most concern to them. In some cases where profiles had been deleted by Facebook without warning, individuals were able to find their closest contacts again

through the simple search feature and began the arduous task of re-building their profile. To a certain extent the movement of individuals on to Facebook in order to perform the eating disorder self had reversed some of the processes of forcing the community to disappear into the depths of cyberspace. For all that Facebook still repeatedly deleted content, participants seemed disinclined to move anywhere else – and if ever there was evidence of the pervasiveness of Facebook it is here.

## LIFESTYLE AND COMMUNITY

Research that has looked at patterns of behaviour regarding pro-eating disorder communities has tended to focus on the communities themselves. That is, sites and groups that are specifically orientated to the discussion of eating disorders – whether this be information, support or encouragement and so on. The difference with the research conducted here is that all data comes from individual's profiles and the content and interactions that occur on them. Nevertheless, there are identifiable similarities in content and the themes that emerge between this and existing research, despite the egocentric nature of the Facebook profile there was still some essence of community feeling. Such a feeling manifested itself from subtle hints towards a collective identity such as using “we” instead of “I” during the interviews, or indeed in response to status updates “we will fight”, “we’re here for you”, there was a depth of emotion and genuine sense of attachment that made those in the eating disorder case study seem more than merely a collective, but certainly it did not quite live up to being a community in its fullest sense. Furthermore the technical advances in Facebook, such as photo tagging, allow for an interesting appropriation of these tools for interconnectivity that is not often seen on websites and other online platforms, such as message boards.

There is an emphasis from members of pro-eating disorders communities as selecting the behaviours they engage with as part of a lifestyle choice – often, they do not proclaim to have a disease or an illness, and emphasize the rational choice that they are making (Martin, 2005, p.156). There is a distrust of medical professionals and their classification of eating disorders as disorders, also often accompanied by disgust as the ‘fatness’ of Western societies. Through “challenging dominant institutions and culture” individuals with an eating disorder identity can normalize “their own understandings and explanations of their practices even though simultaneously they remain the socially marginalized group” (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.29). Such practices are not uncommon across any identities that are considered taboo or deviant. Rogers and Buffalo (1974) in their discussion of ‘fighting back’ against deviant or negative labelling identify two modes of adaptation relevant here. The first of which is modification which involves exchanging a negative label for a more positive one, primarily through the manipulation of language – for example, the use of ‘princess’ rather

than the alternative clinical terms for having an eating disorder (particularly for pro-anorexics, willing an eating disorder is objectionable, however being a princess is not). The second is reinterpretation, whereby the deviant label is accepted however it is manipulated in such a way that the ends justify the means (that being the deviant behaviour). This can be seen on individual's profiles on Facebook, often in 'about me' and 'favourite quotes' sections of profiles – for example, the Kate Moss quote 'nothing tastes as good as thin feels' was a favourite amongst participants, a pop culture reference that appeared to justify participant's deviant behaviour. However frequently this technique could be seen in the attacks made on fatness as a means of justifying the individual's obsession with thinness and their eating disorder identity. The use of images of morbidly obese women was a common tool used to emphasize the point, and indeed make it difficult to argue against. Individuals used these counter-cultural attacks as a means of trying to regain a sense of self and find some ontological grounding, firstly in an attempt to convince themselves of the legitimacy of their eating disorder identity but also by drawing in others as support.

Csipke and Horne (2007: 202) identify that the notion of what is meant by 'lifestyle' is blurred, whilst often argued as a lifestyle choice, most appear to concede, at some point the eating disorder becomes an intrinsic part of the individual, if not an all-consuming element. On Facebook the presentation of the eating disorder identity certainly appeared to have engrossed the majority of participants, with very little content being about anything but the eating disorder or the associative state of anxiety and/or depression.

<3<3 Sorority Life Super Fast Adds <3<3, Low Calorie Food, I'm a princess (; NO FAT GIRLS IN BIKINIS!, Memoirs of an Anorexic Teenager, Secret Number..., On The Borderline, Nicole Richie, Treasure Isle: The Adventure Game, Eichenschule Scheeßel, Not being addicted to food, Wanarexics = Evil attention seekers, PLEASE DO NOT ASSUME WE ARE THE SAME., Men with British accents are sexy!, Sad Poems, Being skinny is better than being fat.. like you., KidsGiveMeHope - The Cutest Little Stories, LivingWithMI You Tube Channel, LoveGivesMeHope - Stories That Make You Go "AWWW!", YoVille, Porque Romi Yan Nunk sea Olvidada (te amoo), Gamers Unite!, Rhianna Atwood, Deja de hacerte la perra ardiente Gordita! (bty boop), BeAuTy FrOm PaIn, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, How To Think Thin, I HATE CALORIES, Voulue, Size Zero, Jillian Michaels, I've come too far to take orders from a cookie., Tragic Beautiful, Dancing, Flat Stomachs, Diet, Kate Moss, [MY EATING DISORDER] is not something i'm proud of, Hollywood Diet, Mein Herz schlägt schwarz, rot, gold!, Wie ich mir die 11 88 0 merke? Ganz einfach: 11 Argentinier haben in der 88. Minute noch 0 Tore !!, CASSIE, Diet Coke, Get Skinny, Be Happy!, Send Thinspo Icons !!, Sorry, I can't be perfect, diet, I want Nicholas Sparks to create me a boyfriend., Losing Weight, Victoria's Secret, my beautiful disaster<3, This is the Sickest Wall Post Ever!, LOL at what this Woman replied on this PERV guy!!, Sad Love Quotes For One Sided Love, Such a beautiful disaster ∞, Creating A Bridge - Empowering young ladies to embrace their inner princess., yo tambien abraze mi almohada y llore como nunca en silencio por vos = (, Chanel Iman, Hungry Girl, ••Comfortably\_Numb••, FitWatch, Sorority Life, Tiki Farm, Frases Diarias, "Sorry, a diet coke with your meal wont help you lose weight.", She will be loved <3, o r t h L E S S, What Your Name Says About You

Figure 11: List of groups joined by a participant showing the juxtapositions between the eating disorder identity as a life style and as a mental illness.

Figure 11 is a list of groups joined by one participant, there is a tension here between the proclamation of being Ana (the term for anorexia commonly used within pro-eating disorder communities) and of having a serious mental illness or disorder – for example, ‘Get Skinny, Be Happy’, ‘My Eating Disorder is Not Something I am Proud Of’, ‘Wanarexics = Evil Attention Seekers, PLEASE DO NOT ASSUME WE ARE THE SAME’, and ‘Send Thinspo Icons’ are not immediately indicative of a cohesive presentation of self where the eating disorder identity is concerned. Such conflicts are not an uncommon feature amongst participants. In this instance, the battle between choice and disorder is interjected with a variety of other elements from Facebook games (<3 <3 Sorority Life Super Fast Adds <3 <3), to celebrities (Nicole Richie), to groups more considerate of emotional state (Comfortably\_Numb). However even many of these are borderline, broadly or indirectly indicative of an eating disorder identity in some sense. For example, the group Diet Coke, sugar free fizzy drinks are a common tool used by those with an eating disorder identity in aiding fullness and the prevention of eating.

Further, there is not a common consensus within pro-eating disorder communities about being pro-eating disorder, about recovery, even about the terms 'ana' and 'mia'. There is no "common philosophy" shared by those who pertain to an eating disorder lifestyle, and fierce online arguments can be had over such issues (Brotsky and Giles, 2007, p.102-3). Such tensions arise within what is commonly perceived by 'outsiders' to be a singular cohesive group. Individuals with an eating disorder identity can no more be considered a homogenous group than any other subcultural or marginalised collective. Individuals with an eating disorder identity are not all the same. On Facebook there were no tensions witnessed concerning the definitions of what an eating disorder identity or lifestyle were, in fact there were no arguments concerning any points of definition or the manner in which an individual chose to present their eating disorder identity. The only tensions witnessed were associated with appropriate, or rather inappropriate, support where individuals were seen to be unnecessarily negative towards another with respect to their appearance (illustrations and the implications of this will be demonstrated later in the analysis).

Again this lack of friction it is almost certainly due to the fact that the space in which interaction occurs is an individual's personal profile, their own 'private' space, not an open public forum or message board. As such, not only is there an unspoken respect to not attack someone within that space (a norm that seems to cross the expanse of Facebook), but as well as this anyone who is seen to be a problem can be removed from the individual's Facebook network and if necessary blocked. Although no direct attacks or accusations were made during the research, one source of conflict which appeared on a notable basis during interviews and 'likes' made by participants was the issue of 'fake' eating disorder identities, as one female participant stated:

"you see some of these girls on these groups and they're all sorority princess types. Why would you fake having anorexia? They drive me insane, like wtf? They're the ones who are diseased. Not us [...] I've unfriended so many"

Figure 11 indicates this type of animosity as well with the group: 'Wanarexics = Evil Attention Seekers, PLEASE DO NOT ASSUME WE ARE THE SAME'. Participants were indeed often quite vehement about wanting to disassociate and distance their selves from those they considered to have a faux eating disorder

identity. Although it was never quite established who these 'wanarexics' were, participants never identified specific examples or conditions for being a 'wanarexic' and they did not make an obvious appearance during data collection. It would seem then that although not often publically discussed (or fought over) on individuals' profiles, the tensions found by Brotsky and Giles (2007) have not been entirely eradicated. Instead more implicit statements are made through likes and groups, and generally any potential direct conflict is avoided.

The presentation of self can sometimes be more easily constructed through representations that indicate what we are not rather than what we are. This is particularly pertinent for the eating disorder case study who presented a state of being that suggested they had lost a considerable amount of control over who they were. The fight against 'wanarexics' seems to be much like the fight against 'fatness', an abstract tool from which to attempt to regain a sense of self, the individual directly legitimises the identity by staking their claim as having a *real* eating disorder identity, and reinforcing this through the establishment that everyone on their network also shares the same legitimate identity. Gavin et al (2008) completed research on five pro-ana forums and found that participants would embrace the label of being 'abnormal' in comparison to those outside of the community, but used the forums to confirm that they were 'normal' within the context of each other (being pro-ana).<sup>39</sup> Importantly, part of this identity was the notion of 'doing' anorexia 'right', it was not enough merely to be abnormal but to be so in the correct ways – something which the 'wanarexics' would fall outside of. Potentially, a strong statement is made when the decision to remove someone from the Facebook network is carried out, as it illustrates the uselessness of that audience member to the individual. Even if the tie is only a very weak one, to discover that another individual cannot bear to have you on their Facebook friend list is a bit of a slap in the face. In this instance however no one actually needs to be removed from an individual's Facebook network, the mere act of stating that is has been done is enough to serve its purpose as a marker of self.

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<sup>39</sup> The methodology used by Gavin et al (2008) leaves much to be desired in an ethical sense. Their justification for using a covert method and not attempting to gain informed consent is also considerably weak (essentially amounting to it having worked before). As this research confirms, it is possible to gain informed consent, make the researcher's presence known and gather large amounts of quality data. The deception Gavin et al's research engages with, of such a vulnerable and already mistrusting group, is unnecessary and unethical. Such is made worse by the researchers' decision to carry out their research over Christmas, one of the most distressful times for those with an eating disorder.

## IDENTITY

The notion of an eating disorder lifestyle is one that is rife with problems and even from the limited (in terms of professional background) observations of individuals made here the eating disorder identity did not display itself as one that individuals chose to have. In line with the literature it is also considered here that the eating disorder identity will, without intervention, inevitably become an all-consuming identity, and a distinctly conflicted and harrowing one at that. It is difficult to illustrate the intensity of the eating disorder identity without watching it unfold, however figures 12 and 13 are examples of the kinds of posts made by participants on their profiles every day. Alongside these are status updates such as: "my parents want me to go inpatient too but I refuse. I want to get better, but then again I am so comfortable with this disease now :(" and "Don't live like me...you'll get wrinkles before your 20". These are admittedly some of the more subdued posts made by individuals, it seemed unfair to make a spectacle out of their darker moments, particularly as it is not the eating disorder identity itself which is the focus of the thesis.

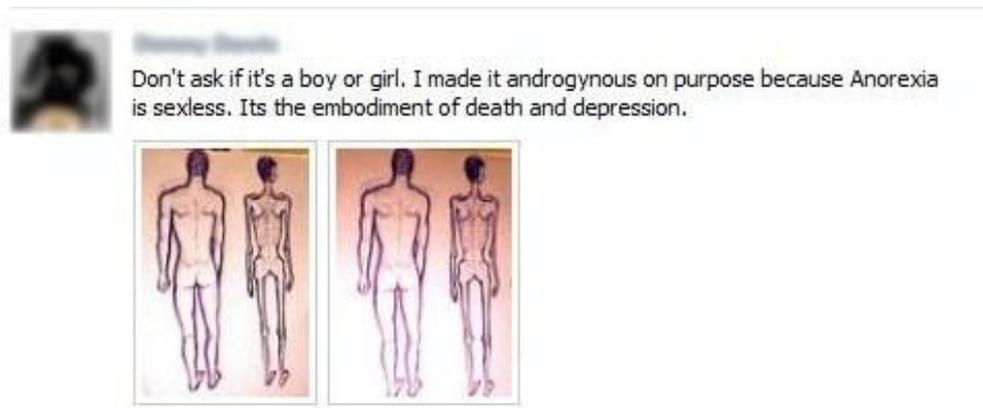


Figure 12: example post of participant with an eating disorder identity



Figure 13: example of a participant's profile wholly consumed with the eating disorder identity

Online eating disorder sites and communities act as a 'safe' place to perform an eating disorder identity, a place where individuals can express their identity with relatively little fear of persecution, segregation or disapproval (Taylor, 2002, Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006 and Gavin et al, 2008). Gavin et al highlighted how pro-ana forums offered "a space in which their identity is supported, accepted and understood", which was anticipated as being unachievable elsewhere (Gavin et al, 2008, p.329). This is certainly a rhetoric reproduced amongst participants and the ability to perform the identity without fear of negative repercussion is greatly appreciated. For the individual, knowing that they have a space, albeit a virtual one, where they are able to release their frustrations or take pride in their weight loss/gain and so on can make the difference between a good day and a bad day – Gavin et al (2008), again, demonstrated the importance of 'venting' in their research. It is worth reaffirming at this point that the Internet has been identified as an environment that offers a certain level of security in which people may engage with perhaps more taboo elements of self, or generally have more opportunity to 'play' with their identity (Turkle, 1996) in a perhaps more vehement way than the offline would allow. This practice of expressing, emphasizing and experimenting with identity in and of itself is not something unique to people with an eating disorder identity, nor is it necessarily symptomatic of

having a serious disorder or illness, or indeed any sort of deviant identity. However it is the futility with which the eating disorder identity is practiced in these online spaces which was most heart wrenching throughout the research process. This is not to say that individuals gained nothing from performing this self on Facebook, however these gains were only ever fleeting, illustrated by the perpetual nature of the posts made and the claims to be recognised within them. Whilst it does not bear thinking about what might have happened to some of the participants if they were not able to perform their eating disorder identity online, Facebook also provided a somewhat false state of being – creating a bubble and suspending the reality of living with an eating disorder.

As alluded to previously, there is also evidence that participation in and belonging to online communities can result in the normalisation of an identity, and much of the above could be seen to contribute to this process. Being surrounded, albeit virtually, by people who share in the identity, means it no longer seems strange or odd. This is something that concerns eating disorder professionals as “[i]f the identity in question is potentially dangerous then the experience of support online may lead to the demarginalisation and legitimisation of negative, harmful behaviours” (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.284). Gavin et al (2008) emphasized how participants normalised the identity through shared experiences (such as hair loss), and confirmation that this only meant the individual was ‘doing it right’. Yet this renders Internet users as passive and inactive consumers of the information and even the people that are presented to them in this space; it neglects that “participants in websites are also actively creating, changing and making sense of their social worlds” (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.285). The appropriation of websites, images, information and so on is not uncommon feature of any marginalised group and it is therefore not surprising that people with an eating disorder identity will manipulate a source to fit said identity. What the above concern also fails to address is that individuals with an eating disorder identity exist outside of the virtual realm, and the community, did not suddenly appear as a result of pro-eating disorder websites. As Ferreday iterates: “While the community might appropriate technology as a means of becoming visible and creating a space in which to speak, community itself is rooted in having an anorexic body and in the day-today experiences of living with an eating disorder” (Ferreday, 2003: 285). This is not to suggest that the communities themselves exist in the

offline, and from interviewing participants it was very clear there was no such thing as an eating disorder community outside of cyberspace. However the individuals who make the community online do of course exist in the offline and are forced to manage the eating disordered body every moment of their lives.

Whilst Facebook provides individuals with a bubble in which their problematic identity is normalised, they *live* in a world in which it is not. It is all too easy with online research to forget the lived embodied experiences of participants – and Gavin et al (2008) are guilty of doing just this. They describe participants' discussions of family, and how painful it is for them to hide their pro-ana identity but at the same time the fear of repercussion prevents them from telling their loved ones (again, something that was most certainly present in the research here). They go on to argue that due to the normalisation of the identity within the group context, and the sharing of negative experience or fear concerning those outside of the group, people with pro-ana identities are prevented and deterred from revealing the identity to family members or friends, and therefore are less likely to receive support from health professionals. Gavin et al's (2008) research was covert and at no point were participants spoken to, there is nothing from the evidence provided to suggest that this is the case, therefore their conclusion is something of an assumption, and a poor one at that. It fails to consider knowledge of eating disorders beyond the online, such as, the context in which we are seeing higher rates of eating disorders and numbers of people coming forward for or being referred for help. There is no evidence that prior to being able to validate the identity in an online environment those with an eating disorder identity were *more* likely to reveal the self to their family or friends or do so at an earlier stage, the available quantitative data at least could suggest quite the opposite<sup>40</sup>.

In concurrence with what was found in some of the analysis of the fetish case study, profiles are created specifically to indulge an eating disorder identity, evident by individual's names often containing 'Ana' or 'Mia', by the overwhelming presence of others with similar names on friends lists, and by the nature of the content which is almost exclusively orientated to eating disorder chatter. The fragmented self here was fundamentally

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<sup>40</sup> There are a number of common themes identified between this research and Gavin et al's (2008), however largely due to their chosen methodology and a failure to appreciate the experience of *living* with an eating disorder, their analysis of the data was exasperating to read.

the same as that presented in the fetish case study, and as such a lengthy description is not warranted again. Suffice to say that the content of profiles was almost exclusively related to the eating disorder identity as were the status and other updates made by the individuals in this case study. Audiences were constructed from those who shared the eating disorder identity and most of these appeared to be engaging with the fragmented form of impression management as well, judging by their use of pseudonyms and their profile photos, and the content of their interactions with participants. As with the fetish case study, Goffman's (1959) framework of audience segregation is of use here: by keeping audiences apart, and out of hearing distance of each other the individual may embrace their eating disorder identity without fear of spoiling their other identities. As with 'Secret Sex' in the fetish case study, keeping the performance of the eating disorder identity isolated was not done so with the direct intention of maintaining the legitimacy of eating disordered self – this was primarily achieved through other means. Participants readily acknowledged that they had other performances which would be jeopardised by the revelation of the eating disorder self, and this was a generally accepted fact. Yet unlike the fragmented self in the fetish case study there was a distinct sense, from the individual and their audience, that the eating disorder identity was their 'real' self and their 'real' group, creating a strong in-group alignment (Goffman, 1963).

There was an additional form of impression management engaged with by those from the eating disorder case study, and although it was used very infrequently, perhaps by three or four participants, the unusual nature of it warrants its inclusion. For the most part profiles were similar in their construction to the fragmented presentations of self, however the profile photo was of the profile owner, not disguised and the name appeared to be real. In addition to this alongside the eating disorder audience, there was a small but nevertheless very present audience of others who were not part of this identity. These audience members tended to be quite active on the individual's profile however not often in entirely positive ways, and there was a considerable amount of conflict between the audiences. The purpose of such impression management was not ascertainable, however it was certainly not successful by any usual measures of impression management.

## EMBODIMENT AND THINSPIRATION

The concept of living with an anorexic or other eating disorder body leads to the notion of embodiment, and through this the use of thinspiration. An eating disorder centres on control and manipulation of the body into a socially constructed ideal (Ferreday, 2003), therefore it is unsurprising that visual imagery of the body is used prolifically on Pro-ED sites. Norris et al (2006: 445) found that 92% of the pro-eating disorder websites in their study contained thinspiration material, the majority of which was visual; similarly Lapinski (2006: 248) found 16 of their sample of 19 pro-eating disorder sites contained such imagery – including ‘reverse triggers’ of obese women. Thinspiration is the visual bodily representation of an eating disorder identity (and indeed, anti-eating disorder identities), but the meaning of such images go beyond the physical representation of the body itself. Within them the individual with an eating disorder identity sees their hopes of what they desire, and the fear of failing to achieve it.

Burke (2009) makes a case that virtual communities in fact represent a disembodiment – given that thinspiration material and bodies that are represented are not those of the individuals with an eating disorder identity themselves. However, although on pro-eating disorder websites this is often the case, within the forums and message boards that allow image posting, individuals do indeed post images of themselves. For example, Fox et al (2005: 955) explored a forum dedicated to photographs of users:

“some were captioned with a comment about how the image might be ‘disturbing’ or even ‘crack the screen’ [...] photographs appeared to have been selected with care, to present a deliberately staged version of the self [...] They received much comment from other users [...] noting that the subject was exceptionally thin and beautiful, and a source of *thinspiration*” (Fox et al, 2005: 955).

Such behaviour is even more prolific on Facebook, and indeed is not limited to the pro-eating disorder community. There is a general practice on SNS of posting photos of oneself and encouraging others, both explicitly and implicitly, to comment on them. With individuals with an eating disorder identity, these sorts of

actions appear to be more acutely visible and frequent than in the other case studies. Whereby all other case study identities contain a visual element to them (to varying degrees), within the eating disorder case study how the self is presented visually is of critical importance. Most individuals within the eating disorder case study have photo albums containing general 'thinspiration' photos, and around half also have photo albums of themselves, quite often depicting a visual timeline of their weight loss, of areas they are proud of, of areas they feel need improvement. But almost always, by outsider, non-eating disorder standards at least, they are photos of the individuals looking thin, and at times emaciated. Almost invariably new photo posts would evoke numerous comments from Facebook friends, offering congratulations, reassurance, compliments, that have a strong supportive and genuine quality about them (see figure 14 on the next page).

The argument for disembodiment is further challenged on Facebook with general thinspiration images also. Although still photos of individuals who are not members of the pro-eating disorder community, the technical advance of being able to tag people in photos allows for a more direct association – indicating valued friendships and connections. Individuals will tag each other in a particular thinspiration photo, one that they feel reflects or reminds them of the people who are tagged. Those that have been tagged will leave comments on the photo, thanking the individual for tagging them, and generally expressing what again appears to be genuine happiness.

“i always get nervous when i get notifications that ive been tagged you never know what it might be. But its sooooo nice when its a photo of this really slim attractive body. Someone has seen that and thought of me its a good feeling”

Whilst a full social network analysis has not been completed, it does appear from the interviews and general observation that this practice of tagging is not simply random, and illustrates a set of bonds within the wider community that are stronger and more closely knit than the others. In response to being asked about their tagging practices another participant stated:

“Hmm, I don’t know, it’s not random, but it’s not like I always tag the same people. Sometimes it will be because I think they really need cheering up, if they have been sad lately, or because I know they will really like the photo, it’s what they want to be like. That kind of thing.”



Figure 14: photo of a participant and the resulting comments

The lack of the physical body can offer some sense of empowerment to particular groups of people, for example, being physically disabled does not affect one's online presence, disabled and nondisabled individuals begin on a level playing field (Bothwell, 2011). Goffman (1963) identifies the "obtrusiveness" of a spoiled identity in a particular context being an important factor in the extent to which an individual is actually stigmatised. Using the example of a wheelchair user and someone with a speech impediment in a boardroom meeting Goffman (1963) argues that although the wheelchair user might have the more directly visible stigma it does not impede him from contributing to the meeting and may therefore be ignored as much as possible<sup>41</sup>. Conversely, having a speech impediment will significantly break communication between the individual and the other board members, therefore making their otherwise non-visible stigmatising trait plainly obvious and impossible to ignore. The Internet then provides an environment in which a highly visible stigmatising identity can be rendered unobtrusive on a consistent basis, indeed the same could also be said for the individual in Goffman's (1963) example with a speech impediment.

The online can act as a shield against stigmatising identities and the process of disembodiment can be fundamental to some individuals' sense of self, however for the eating disorder community it is the retaining of embodiment that provides this opportunity. In the offline world an eating disorder identity is not necessarily visible, perhaps at its most extreme it is painfully unavoidable but at this stage individuals are likely to be hidden from the general public's gaze in hospitals and or other medical institutions and their families will thus in most cases be aware of the problematic self. The exception may be where the individual comes into contact with an expert or professional whose "training may allow them to be immediately struck by something that is invisible to the laity" (Goffman, 1963, p.67). As Goffman argues "the decoding capacity of the audience must be specified before one can speak of degree of visibility", which could also include those who share the eating disorder identity being able to recognise certain tell-tale signs (Goffman, 1963, p.68). Yet on Facebook individuals with an eating disorder identity are able to safely flaunt their stigmatised bodies, and

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<sup>41</sup> Goffman (1963, p.64) defines visibility as "how well or how badly the stigma is adapted to provide means of communicating that the individual possesses it", or in other words the extent to which others can literally see the stigmatising identity. He distinguishes this from 'known-about-ness' (the stigma has been learnt of previously or through word of mouth, therefore it is 'seen' only because it is 'known'), obtrusiveness (the extent to which the stigmatising identity breaks communication) and 'perceived focus' (the spheres in which the stigma is presumed by others to be unsuitable for those with a particular stigma).

rather than it become obtrusive it actually enables communication between similarly minded others. Images of the usually problematic body act as proof of the eating disorder identity and therefore authenticates it, developing and reinforcing the individual's relationship with their audience – other 'real' eating disordered individuals.

On Facebook embodiment is highly controlled and manipulated, individuals have ultimate power over the images they post of themselves and the presentation of self they perform through this. The use of the body on Facebook is a re-embodiment, as much as the self might be re-centred so too can the body be re-embodied. The presentation of the body on Facebook is not identical to the body which is carried in the offline, nor is it wholly distinct from it, it is an image borne from how the individual wants others to see it, and not necessarily as it actually is. The majority of bodily representations on Facebook are static, meaning that the body does not move, fold or bend as it does offline. It is captured in a single moment of time and therefore once the individual has created their ideal bodily image it remains in the same state forever more.

## SUPPORT

As has been briefly touched upon above the sense of support on Facebook is prominent with people with an eating disorder identity. Despite the orientation to individual profiles opposed to community based forums, message boards and so on, support remains to be a fundamental feature of interaction, and indeed in the absence of much conflict perhaps even more so. More broadly on pro-eating disorder sites, individuals will often make direct pleas for support, and within such closely woven communities these calls do not often go unnoticed. Calls for support have generally been found to centre on weight loss, exercise and food, with responses involving both pro-eating disorder and pro-recovery messages (Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006, p.291). It should be reiterated at this point that “in other contexts and relationships these eating disorders are seldom understood, and come to be stigmatised and marginalised” (Rich, 2006, p.297). Thus, individuals with an eating disorder identity seek not only technical but emotional support from others in the same situation (Tierney, 2006). It makes sense to want to talk about any problem, issue or dilemma with an other or others who will understand on a practical and emotional level through their own lived experience. The fact that even on a pro-eating disorder site, support may come in pro-recovery terms, suggests again, the very real, and genuine nature of the pro- eating disorder community, and its importance to its members. There is a respect for individuals who are choosing to take the path of recovery, even if it is not the path their peers have chosen for themselves (Brotsky and Giles, 2007, p.101; see also Wesemann and Grunwald, 2008).

Such displays of pro-recovery support, exemplified in figures 15 and 16 below, are almost constant within the eating disorder case study. For every individual who makes a claim for recognition, who calls for role support, there are usually at least three times as many who head that claim and comment with kind words, concern and positive messages of recovery that stem from an intrinsic understanding of what the individual is experiencing at that moment in time.



Figure 15: example of support upon posting a 'recovery' photo



Figure 16: participant's response to support received

However as mentioned earlier, the pro-eating disorder community is not one of absolute continuity. Brotsky and Giles (2007) in their covert ethnography of a pro-eating disorder community experienced considerable hostility, scepticism and outright anger and aggression from some members, despite the acceptance and kindness expressed by other individuals in the same space. Should the 'wrong' question be asked, a barrage of insults came forth, and individuals were ridiculed and belittled for their lack of knowledge. There is, certainly, an ever present sense of competition amongst the eating disorder community, despite the intense levels of camaraderie and caring. Rich (2006) also found, when researching individuals in an eating disorder clinic, that "whilst they often encouraged the 'sharing' of anorexic practices, and offered support to one

another, they were also simultaneously engaging with each other in more competitive and even hostile ways” (Rich, 2006, p.300). There is a sense that it is not enough to merely have an eating disorder identity, or to have an eating disorder, but to be the best at having one, that is to be the thinnest, to be the most in control. This resonates with that mentioned previously about the condemnation of ‘wanarexics’ and the construction of self in opposition of having a real eating disorder identity.

On Facebook hostility predominantly manifests in comments on photos that individuals have posted of themselves. Others will make a point of identifying photos that are not ‘Ana’ enough, meaning that the person does not look thin enough, or conversely that an individual is too thin, and has therefore lost control. For the former however, such comments are often met with responses from other community members that chastise the individual for posting such negative and vindictive comments, and giving reassurance to the individual in the photo that whatever the rogue community member may have said is not true. For example, after a lengthy argument with another individual about the comments they had posted on a particular photo album, one individual states to the album owner: “people like this [...] guy [...] are the ones you should be avoiding, you should be deleting, and should not be allowing them to preach they’re false idealism on YOUR page”. The emphasis on ‘your page’ is an interesting one and affirms that mentioned previously about the unwritten Facebook norm that individual’s personal spaces should be treated with respect. At other times the hostility is not aimed towards the individual who has posted the image but at those with an eating disorder identity in general and is enabled by the individual having other ‘outsider’ audiences present on their eating disorder profile. As stated before this form of identity management was rare within the eating disorder case study however they were somewhat noticeable due to the confusion and lack of understanding from the outside audiences who seemed unable to believe what they were witnessing.

## SUMMARY

The eating disorder case study was both fascinating and terrifying to engage with during the research process, due to the complexity of the nature of the identity but also the sad circumstances that surrounded it. In general those with an eating disorder identity engaged with a fragmented form of impression management whereby using closed security settings and a disguised self the individual maintained a profile that was wholly separate from their main Facebook account, thereby allowing as full an engagement with the identity as the individual desired without risk of disturbing their performances elsewhere. There were a few exceptions to the engagement with this style of impression management which still involved a profile seemingly dedicated to the eating disorder identity, but however also included the presence of an audience that did not hold the identity themselves. The reasoning behind such a choice was unable to be established, and indeed it was a choice that did not seem to proffer the opportunity for successful identity management as there were quite often between the eating disorder and non-eating disorder audiences.

The role of Facebook was pivotal for those with an eating disorder identity to be able to perform this aspect of self in a safe environment amongst likeminded others, as such a space was inaccessible anywhere offline. Facebook provided opportunity for individuals to forge strong relationships and participants reported that some of these had transgressed to other modes of communication such as SMS messaging, however none had managed to establish offline relationships with their Facebook audiences. Claims to be recognised and attempts to ground the self were made on a continual basis, and although they were nearly always responded to with meaningful and genuine support from audience members, ultimately the effect was short lived as indicated by the perpetual nature of the claims. The support and friendship received on Facebook for those with an eating disorder identity was undoubtedly invaluable for individuals, yet at the same time largely meaningless for long term ontological security, and indeed, recovery.

# CASE STUDY: GOTH

## INTRODUCTION

The following analysis concerns the data collected from observation of participants within the Goth case study. Subcultural groups are by their very definition seen as taboo or deviant by the majority of others due to their rejection of mainstream music, fashion and values. However there is variation in the extent to which particular subcultural groups are seen as potentially dangerous, harmful or immoral. Public and media attention turned on to the Goth subculture in these ways somewhere in the mid-1990s, but most notably after the 1999 Columbine High School shootings by two individuals labelled as Goths (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007 and Frymer, 2009). Those identified by others as Goths were as a consequence ostracized and feared, most notably in the USA but the panic spread somewhat to the UK as well. There were two repercussions from the increased public animosity towards anyone perceived as Goth. Firstly, the identity became more problematic and difficult to manage, and since the late 1990s the Goth subculture, at least in its traditional form, has been dwindling in membership numbers. Secondly, due to the mislabelling of anyone 'alternative' or subversive as Goth, influences within the Goth subculture began to diversify and different types of Goth subculture emerged (for example, Cyber Goth) as these outcast youth were pushed together. This diversification may have also been in part due to the increased difficulty of maintaining a traditional Goth identity in public forums.

More recently, the perceived 'threat level' of the Goth subculture has lowered considerably. Rather than feared Goths are more often the object of mockery, although as the tragic case of Sophie Lancaster's murder in 2007 attests there is a considerable amount of irrational hatred, likely due to fear of the unknown, towards Goths. No longer seen as being dangerous, Goths are left vulnerable to a different kind of victimisation, but which nevertheless impacts upon the identity performances and management the group are required to engage with to get by in everyday life whilst retaining their commitment to the Goth subculture. To a certain

extent Goths have achieved a “redefinition” of the stigmatising identity whereby “[t]he characteristic or behavior remains the same, but society has altered its view and redefined the deviant behaviour in positive terms of approval” (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972, p.113). However, what it has been redefined as, is not particularly positive either.

Coincidentally, it is around the time of the Columbine High School shooting that Hodkinson embarked on a lengthy piece of ethnographic based insider research on Goths and their use of the personal web blog platform LiveJournal. The bulk of this analysis will use Hodkinson as a bench mark from which to assess the use of Facebook, as it seems the majority of work conducted on Goths since make considerable reference to his works. However there are a number of problems with Hodkinson’s analyses to be discussed in turn concerning situating the data within wider social contexts and the notion of Goth as subcultural. There is a long established relationship between the Goth subculture and the Internet, even before the World Wide Web Goths were prolific Usenet newsgroup users. The Internet is “...the most important channel for the dissemination of Goth culture” (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007, p.9). Such a connection has enabled the Goth subculture to survive far more successfully than its contemporaries, and also contributed to the development of its ‘sister’ manifestations. Mercer (2002) has gone as far as to claim the Goth subculture to be one of the most active and lively communities on the Internet.

Goth appears to be well integrated with other identities, and through the observed performance of it and the statements made during interviews being Goth is not seen as being particularly problematic. Or rather more accurately, participants transfer the issue on to others, labelling it as the other’s problem if they are not willing to accept their Goth self. However, whilst there are a variety of ages within the participant set, the majority are once again ‘younger’ individuals who see Goth as their primary identity that influences most if not all other elements of their personality. This resonates with Goffman’s (1963) in-group alignments discussed previously, where the audience who share the problematic identity are proclaimed as the individual’s ‘real’ group, therefore placing a primacy on the identity itself. Again, this is believed by the individual in question as well as the respective group. ‘Older’ individuals who retain Goth as a central identity tend to have made a

career out of being Goth, through music production/DJ-ing, clothes design or modelling. There is a distinct flaw in the data gathered in that it lacks input from older Goths who have not been afforded the opportunity to make a livelihood from their membership to the Goth subculture. Such individuals make a gradually increasing proportion of the Goth community, yet due to their somewhat insular nature they are difficult to access.

## HISTORY AND PROFILE

Goth as a distinctive subculture emerged in the early 1980s in some part a reaction to “the socioeconomic depression and Thatcherite politics that was overtaking Britain” (Franklin, 2011, p.1). Inspired by the sounds and aesthetics of the punks that came before them, Goths were uniquely and instantly recognisable through their fascination with all things macabre, alternative sexuality and deathly appearance, drawing inspiration from Gothic literature and various religious and folk mythologies (Hodkinson, 2004 and Franklin, 2011). In the 1990s the Goth subculture reached its peak in popularity in both the UK and the USA (Barker, 2003, p.37) and whilst there have been considerable transgressions within the subculture Goths have “been consistently united in their emphasis upon glamorous, and usually feminine, forms of the sombre, the sinister, and the macabre.” (Hodkinson, 2004, p.131). Goodlad and Bibby (2007) argue “that the Goth tendency to embrace gothic literature and art has made the subculture more dialectically engaged with the past than is typical of most youth cultures, providing yet another source of exceptional vitality” (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007, p.4).

Most recently media coverage of Goths has considered the tragic murder of Sophie Lancaster in 2007 and motivated by this the move on April 4th 2013 by Manchester police to record attacks against Goths and members of other alternative scenes and subcultures to be considered as hate crimes. Again, Rogers and Buffalo’s (1972) redefinition comes to mind here as they state “[c]hange and exoneration for many will arrive too late and not within their lifetime” (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972, p.113). It is too late for Sarah Lancaster to benefit from changes in the law and attitudes towards Goths, but her bravery has had a lasting impact within the Goth community and outside of it. Whilst a considerably more positive narrative on the Goth subculture is welcomed, it is unsettling that as Goths became no longer seen as something to fear and therefore to be shouted at from a safe distance, physical attacks seem to have become more prolific. In terms of identity management then, there are potentially very serious consequences of displaying a Goth identity in public, or otherwise no one enjoys having abuse hurled at them. Whilst most participants maintained they did not alter their aesthetic appearance in order to avoid public scrutiny, abuse or violence there was a distinct acknowledgement of changes in behaviour – for example, taking a taxi instead of public transport or

completely avoiding certain areas or pubs/clubs. In the eyes of many Goths, their Goth identity is not a chosen one, it is who they are – they are unable to feel themselves any other way (Barker, 2003). During interviews there was a certain level of defiance against public perception, but also a subdued sadness that they were not able to just 'be' Goth (see figures 17 and 18).

I don't want to give them the satisfaction of being anything I'm not, I'm not ashamed of being a goth, but you've got to be realistic about things and protect yourself as much as you can.

Figure 17: screenshot of interview with male Goth participant discussing their offline performance

i think its worse in america they go nuts over the goth/satan thing. here people just think we're a bit fucking odd. its not just goths though anyone i know thats a bit different gets shit from chavs. most of the time its shouting FREAK or GOTH but i know people who have been beaten up. guys. girls get shouted at or stuff thrown at them. its only guys i've known to get properly hurt. apart from sophie. i burst into tears when sophie died it was so horrible. of all the things to hate in the world so much you would kick and punch them to death i dont think a quiet goth girl is one of them

Figure 18: screenshot of interview with female Goth participant discussing their offline performance

Goths seem to be generally conscious of how they are perceived by the public, although the most extreme reactions to them were pin pointed to particular groups in society, in particular young, white, working class males, who are associated with a violent predisposition. However it was also clear that despite this, there was defiance in maintaining a Goth identity but participants were active in avoiding potentially volatile situations. Despite their macabre appearance, part of the Goth identity is living a tolerant and passive existence and participants' statements were in line with this.

On Facebook however there were no concerns from individuals about displaying their Goth identities, unlike the other case studies Goths articulated no cautiousness when it came to their Facebook audiences, and indeed this was wholly reflected in the content of their profiles which were typically full of Goth orientated content. Suggestions during interviews that individual's might tone down their Goth identity for the benefit of certain audiences were generally met with somewhat bemused responses, along the lines of: "Why would I

do that?”. In terms of fighting back against a deviant label, Rogers and Buffalo's (1972) channelling is relevant here not only in the obvious manner that the Goth identity is utilised as “a fulfilling means of self-expression, personal identity, and social effectiveness” but also in that Goths very often deny “anything undesirable or deviant” about being Goth (Rogers and Buffalo, 1972, p.109 and 110). Some did proffer a little more insight stating that they did not necessarily change their Goth identity in any particular manner but were mindful that most people on their Facebook network would not be interested in seeing streams of Goth orientated content and updates.

One participant reported that they had received some trolling messages calling him a ‘fag satanist’ to which he replied with ‘ignorant prick’ before blocking the person and adjusting his security settings to disallow messages from anyone other than those on his friends list. This kind of intrusion seemed to be an exception rather than a rule, and as illustrated was an issue that was swiftly dealt with. However, it transpired that the individual actually used this attack to re-affirm his Goth identity through a status update about the event, from which he received a notable amount of support and recognition from his friends.

## THE GOTH AESTHETIC

The most glaring aspect of the Goth subculture is their appearance; it is the most definitive way of Goths being identified by one another and others. In terms of Goffman's visibility, it can be seen "at all times during his daily round and by all persons he [sic] encounters therein" (Goffman, 1963, p.65). For the most part Goths can be identified through "generally black clothing, silver jewellery, a pale complexion and dyed hair" (Barker, 2003, p.37). Gunn (2007, p.59) ascribes the Gothic look to the phrase 'death chic' (somewhat similar to 'heroin chic') which "is the stylistic ideal of a pale, deathlike pallor and a thin and (seemingly) sickly body" engaged with by both men and women. Goths take their ideal body form as being somewhat liberating, despite, and perhaps because of, general public horror and distaste for it. Indeed, as Wilkins states:

"goths describe their look as an aesthetic, positioning themselves as a taste culture, rather than as rejecting the principle of taste. Indeed, they use the notion of an aesthetic to claim that they have better taste, that their sense of beauty is more evolved than that of people who follow other fashions" (Wilkins, 2008, p.37).

As has already been stated, the traditional Goth is no longer the only type of Goth in existence. There are a great range of different aesthetics that contribute to Goth subculture, for example, Victorian Goths, Industrial Goths, Cyber Goths, Steampunk Goths and so on (a brief illustration and description of the main sorts of Goths can be found on [blackwaterfall.com](http://blackwaterfall.com)). However despite having wildly different aesthetics, all variations of Goth still uphold almost anorexic thinness as an ideal and are acutely meticulous about displaying the 'right' appearance as figures 19, 20 and 21 below attest. All responses are from female participants, as unfortunately only one male Goth participant was able to be interviewed, who was somewhat haphazard with responses, so there is perhaps a bias in the view point given here. Some even used the poor Goth fashion and look of others to empathise with people who abused them.

Ha, right, we goths love to tell everyone how liberal and free we are but its mostly bullshit. Physical appearance is everything, just like it is for anyone who isn't a goth. If anything goths are worse, because we spread our arms out to hold you and tell you you're beautiful... and then stab you in the back! :3

Figure 19: screenshot from interview with participant about the Goth aesthetic

Eugh, the problem is people do not wear things suitable for their size. If you have a reasonable figure and a flat stomach, then skin tight latex will look hot. If you are the size of a house with rolls protruding from every inch of your body then you will look ridiculous in skin tight latex. What do these people see when they look in the mirror? I am not saying that overweight people are automatically hideous, but come on, THINK about what you are wearing. I don't think that is confined to Goths either, you see these tiny little slips of material in the high street shops that come in an eighteen - it is almost like designers are setting fat people up to be mocked.

Figure 20: screenshot from interview with participant about the Goth aesthetic

you see some people with this really bad makeup and their belly poking out from under their top and you think it's no wonder people take the piss out of us

Figure 21: screenshot from interview with participant about the Goth aesthetic

Subcultural capital then, comes from not simply wearing Gothic clothing and make-up, but wearing them well – having the correct facial features and body type are integral to this, but also skill when it comes to application of make-up and piecing together outfits. For Goths then, recognition is not merely about being recognised as a Goth, it is about being recognised as a beautiful Goth, a *real* Goth – someone who is committed enough to the subculture to maintain the correct aesthetic (which will also involve wearing particular brands, and absolutely not wearing others). As with the legitimisation of the eating disorder and fetish identities, authenticity came from individuals distinguishing themselves from those who were considered fraudulent, or performed a version of the identity which was itself stigmatised by the in-group. The ambivalence projected by lifestyle orientated fetishists against those more sexually grounded can be seen here with 'beautiful' verses 'ugly' Goths – and the sense of repulsion that Goffman (1963) describes is very evident here. The eating disorder case study also comes to mind in the similar disdain towards fatness

illustrated. Some of this elitism may stem from the series of others Goths found themselves collecting after they were mislabelled so often from the mid- 1990s to the early 2000s. In order to set themselves apart 'real' Goths had to evolve and become more stringent with what aesthetics constituted being Goth.

Again as with the eating disorder identity there was not any evidence of these conflicts manifesting into any direct attacks on other individuals, and this can in part be attributed to the norms surrounding individual's personal profiles. However the Goth aesthetic was a fundamental feature on the profiles of those with a Goth identity and constructed the majority of their images, even during the performance of other roles as can be seen in figure 23 where a participant poses with his son in classic Victorian Goth attire. Both figures 22 and 23 are representative of the pervasiveness of the Goth aesthetic within the Goth case study, even where the images are not of the individual themselves they are symbolic of the Goth identity.

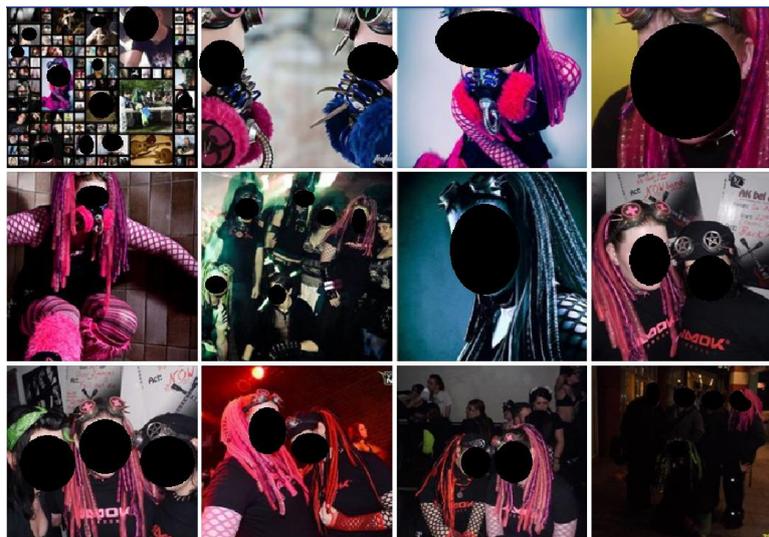


Figure 22: selection of photos of female participant demonstrating pervasiveness of Goth aesthetic



Figure 23: selection of photos of male participant to illustrate pervasiveness of Goth aesthetic

Individuals on Facebook displayed extensive photos of nights out and otherwise looking at their Gothic best. Not only does this emphasize that to appear to look Goth is of vital importance, but it also confirms that individuals do not feel it necessary to implement any particularly strong identity management with regard to displaying their Goth self to the varying audiences present. This is congruent with the statements made by participants above where even in the possibility of hostility they were unwilling to curb their appearance. Included within some individual's photo albums and tagged photos were images of family events, Christmas, weddings, birthdays and so on. Here the Goth identity was still present however tended to be more subdued than comparative images for a night out – which is not unusual, as most people will dress differently for family gatherings compared to their club attire. There are certain situations then where it is appreciated the Goth appearance should be made more palatable for others.

It is important to note however, that the inclusion of photos that were not Goth orientated tended to be where family members were included within the individual's friend's list. Where this was not the case, the photos were far more collectively Goth orientated. So whilst the Goth appearance was not toned down on FB for the benefit of non-Goth audience members, there was inclusion of other at least less Goth content that could be related to by those present and therefore diluting it. The indication being that individuals are on some level aware of their audiences on Facebook and make attempts to cater for them not necessarily through downplaying a potentially controversial self, but at least providing other selves alongside it that the different

audiences will relate to. Although the Goth identity dominates, this form of impression management is indicative of the re-centred self. This relies on the audiences being fully aware of the identity in question however, something which is likely in this case where the visual is such an intrinsic part of the identity in question. The re-centred self in this purest form will not work in situations where audiences are unaware of the identity (if it is not so visually obvious) or unaware of its extent. In such cases the presentation of the most extreme version of the identity will potentially cause some ructions – at the very least mocking and at the other extreme complete rejection.

## BEYOND THE VISUAL

Music, TV and literature interests listed on profiles were relatively unsurprising. 'Dark' or otherwise alternative programmes and novels were a frequent occurrence, generally consistent with what one might expect a Goth to be interested in – vampire novels, crime and serial killer series like Dexter and philosophical works by those such as Nietzsche. Patterns and trends in interests seemed to be consistent with the age of individuals as well – children's TV programmes and food or beverages no longer available or simply popular to the era of growing up (mostly the mid- to late-1990s) were represented frequently through the pages 'liked' by individuals. There is currently a general trend towards being nostalgic about certain common features of childhood experiences that typify the relative era, and one that evidently has not eluded even the Goth. It would seem, despite the outwardly anti-mainstream values of the Goth subculture, the rules are altered when it comes to certain trends from the past.



Figure 24: Example of films liked by participant of a dark and Gothic nature

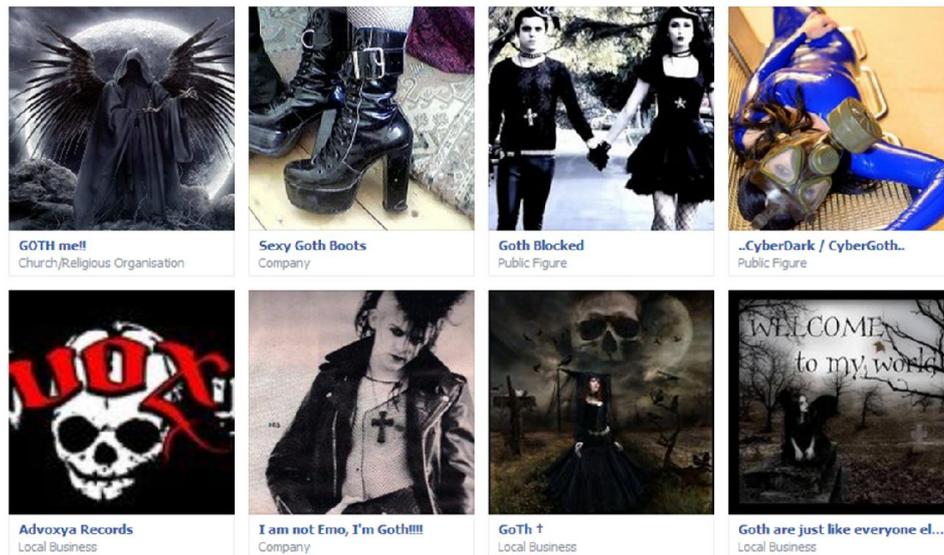


Figure 25: Examples of 'other' likes by participant showing Goth-centricity

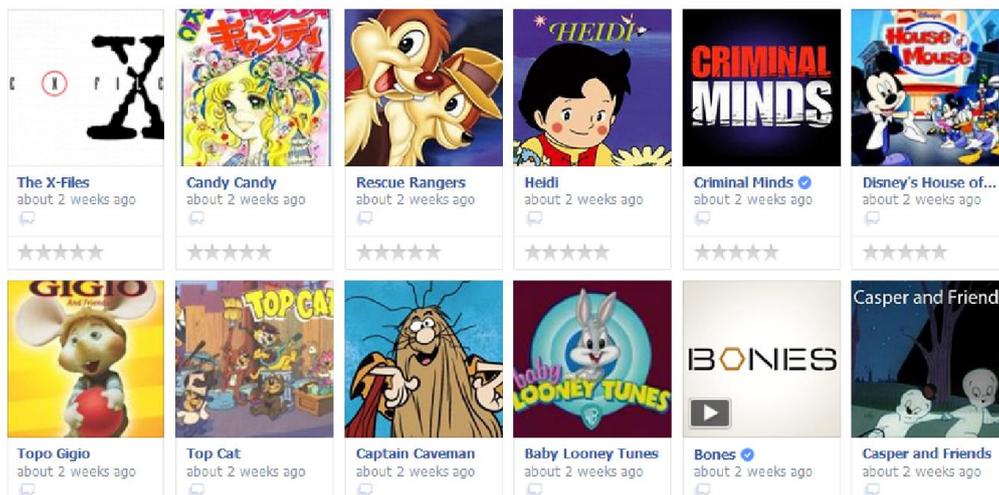


Figure 26: Example of 'retro' cartoons watched by participant

This does not follow with music however. Whilst bands are present from other decades, these are strictly alternative and within that mostly Goth. Nostalgia then does not extend to the liking of commercial music. As with appearance, musical taste appears to be something that the Goth will not generally compromise on. However, with the subtle variations in other types of interests (although again these do tend to be 'alternative' in some way) the Goth may also display their individuality. Political and religious affiliations and opinions also feature fairly commonly on the profiles of Goths, again not unexpected given that Goths state that they are vehemently liberally orientated and pride themselves on this fact, and further are noted for their interest in 'intelligent' conversation and being educated.



Figure 27: Example of music liked by participant illustrating Goth specificity

These patterns of interests and likes were similar across all Goths irrespective of the audiences present. Non-Goth audiences are unlikely to know the majority of bands listed, nor then what they sound like or what the content of the lyrics are. Political views and other such points are more likely to be taken at face value rather than ascribed to being a Goth (and indeed, it is highly questionable to what extent these have anything to do with the subculture per se). Furthermore, although there is an interest in macabre films and TV programmes these are quite often fairly mainstream and thus enjoyed by many – NCIS, Dexter, Clockwork Orange – and therefore are unlikely to receive a dramatic reaction from non-Goth audiences. The occasional interjection of non-Goth orientated interests breaks up the blocks of the dark and macabre, and signifies to audiences that underneath all of the black there is still a human being, with a history, and with more dimensions than that of simply being a Goth.

## LOCALES AND COMMUNITY

Whilst popular in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Goth scene has declined in numerical popularity considerably however “it remained as widespread and intimately connected as ever in terms of geographical scale” (Hodkinson, 2004, p.132). Whilst there were some loyalties to local scenes, and rivalries, overall “such distinctions carried less overall significance than the shared translocal identification of both groups as Goths of one kind or another” (Hodkinson, 2004, p.134). Goths are more likely to perceive commonality between themselves and Goths all over the world rather than non-Goths within their local area (Hodkinson, 2004, p.134). Hodkinson (2004) states that there was a far greater level of similarity than there were marked differences in the tastes and appearances of Goths from different areas of the UK. Hodkinson embarked on an extensive ethnographic piece of research on the use of LiveJournal by members of the Goth community arguing that “although the platform was not overtly community-oriented, the use of LiveJournal tended to enhance subcultural participation because it facilitated the development of strong friendships between Goths and acted as a valuable means for the transfer of subcultural information, enthusiasm and commodities” (Hodkinson, 2006, p.188). Hodkinson does make the mistake above of giving far too positive and uncritical account of the use of LiveJournal, however his observations are useful for comparison with Facebook. Hodkinson states that normal motivations for keeping a diary were given less priority than stimulating conversation, further evidenced by individuals spending the majority of their time on LiveJournal reading and commenting on their friend’s journals rather than writing their own (Hodkinson, 2006, p.189).

The scenario described here is somewhat similar to the situation found on Facebook. Hodkinson puts an emphasis on ‘conversation’, however the use of the word conversation has been taken largely at face value with little scrutiny. On Facebook the onus is not on what people are saying, but rather that they are saying something. Indeed as Hodkinson acknowledges “the desire to generate interaction of some kind at times resulted in the posting of rather trivial or meaningless entries” (Hodkinson, 2006, p.189). The need to post, and the posting of nothing and everything, is symptomatic of a claim to be recognised for one’s literal existence. Making a post, even if it is about nothing, means that you will maintain a presence on

news/update feeds and in turn be noticed and not be forgotten. However participants identified that there were certain individuals within their Facebook audience that it was important they received a response from because of the level of friendship between them, this was not necessarily Goth specific however their closest friends did also tend to be Goths. As was suggested in the literature review, there was an expectation that individuals would post with certain others in mind and want to receive recognition from those whom they were closest too and in turn respected and admired.

Hodkinson found that unlike on public discussion forums the friends list on LiveJournal:

“...functioned to enable regular interaction with a relatively stable set of existing friends, rather than random contact with anonymous strangers. Respondents frequently emphasized the value of LiveJournal as a means to maintain regular contact with people they had an existing face-to-face relationship with and to keep up with the various events taking place in one another’s lives.” (Hodkinson, 2006, p.190)

In addition to this Hodkinson highlighted the use of LiveJournal as a relatively unobtrusive means of maintaining contact with acquaintances as well. Typically interaction would occur in face to face settings before moving to the online, however Hodkinson does acknowledge this worked in reverse on occasion. On Facebook, there was not such a firm emphasis on having met face to face before establishing contact. Participants integrated a mixture of friends in real life, also family, and then people they had added as strangers based purely on their Goth identity. Some of these strangers had become classified as good friends even if a face to face meeting had never occurred, although this was reasonably rare. Most of those identified as being important interactants and from whom participants desired recognition were those known in real life. So although face to face interaction was not highlighted as being particularly important as a requirement to be a Facebook friend, it was so in terms of receiving recognition.

Hodkinson argues that the development of strong relationships on LiveJournal "...reinforced their practical and emotional participation in the subculture" and "...served to reinforce participants' general sense of investment in and attachment to the Goth scene as a community" (Hodkinson, 2006, p.191 and p.191-2). Furthermore he identifies that LiveJournal encouraged Goths to go to events (which were also publicised through word of blog) and see friends not only within their local area, but also to travel and see those LiveJournal friends they had made further afield, where in turn they were likely to meet other individuals who became LiveJournal friends. Again this cohesive community feel was not very apparent on Facebook and certainly not in the same way as it was on both the eating disorder case study and to varying extents within the fetish case study. Individuals appeared for the most part to have enough offline relationships and interactions with Goths in their immediate locality to not try and seek further immersion in this way on Facebook. Online communities tend to exist most predominantly where the offline world has failed to equip people with the means of establishing such communities. An important difference for the Goth case study as well is that it is a publically visible identity, and out of the three case studies is the most socially acceptable. Not only then may communities be established in particular locales but they can also be publically displayed and performed – in comparison to the eating disorder identity of which there is no opportunity to establish a community, and those with a fetish identity who do have communities but which have to remain cautious in their collective public performances.

## AGING GOTHS

The Goth subculture is an aging subculture, perhaps due to the negative media coverage and public reaction that continued into the early 2000s there have been fewer young teenagers becoming Goths, choosing instead alternatives influenced by Goth such as 'Emo' (Hodkinson, 2011). As a result however, "...rather than forming an increasingly isolated minority within an otherwise youthful community, older goths have remained involved in sufficient numbers that their scene itself is increasingly dominated by the over-thirties" (Hodkinson, 2011, p.263). Aside from Hodkinson little has been said about aging Goths specifically. Although unfortunately they are also largely absent from this research as a specific subset, those who were present were notable through their more balanced presentation of the Goth identity alongside other roles and performances (for example, as in figure 23 above). Hodkinson (2011) argues that "...an enduring sense of personal belonging to the Goth scene was apparent..." however as they got older the importance of participating in the Goth 'scene' became less central to individuals' sense of self, and compromises became necessary to engage with other identities (Hodkinson, 2011, p.267).

Hodkinson identified further that even when participants did partake in 'going out' that the places attended altered to accommodate sitting down and conversing, rather than dancing an entire night. Furthermore, a growing range of interests and activities and enjoying the company of long-term friends within individual's own homes or non-Goth specific public spaces meant that Goth events lost their primary status. It could also be considered that a declining interest in the Goth subculture because its activities are centred on a more youthful ethos, lead the participants to seek out other ways of socialising and enjoyment. Hodkinson argues that many of those within these close circles of friends were also Goth "illustrating the enduring importance of the subculture" (Hodkinson, 2011, p.271). However if anything this seems to illustrate the enduring nature of friendship rather than the subculture, as the interests, activities and settings for these friends to meet are not associated with the Goth scene. Aesthetically the individuals may have still been Goth, but 'looking the part' is insufficient to constitute being a member of a subculture. Furthermore being mostly white and middle class Goths are likely to have similar trajectories when it comes to types of employment and levels of education

providing shared experiences that will only serve to reaffirm the friendships and relationships again indicating that it was the Goth subculture and identity that brought certain individuals together but it is not necessarily such that keeps them so.

These kinds of transitions were notable on Facebook, at the very least older Goths' audiences tended to be of a more variant nature than their younger counterparts and yet distinctly smaller as well. Older individual's profiles still had a high level of Goth content and certainly more passive forms of exhibiting the Goth identity by liking Goth orientated cultural artefacts were engaged with on reasonably a regular basis. However there were less active forms of performing the Goth identity, such as sharing a YouTube video of a Goth band or uploading streams of Goth orientated images. Furthermore the Goth identity was noticeably interjected more often with family photos and other conventional life experiences. Older Goth individuals clearly still had a strong attachment to their Goth identity, but it seemed that it had fundamentally lost its subversive nature, yet this was something individuals seemed comfortable with. There were no outlandish or perpetual calls to be recognised as seen in other identities where the desired self could not be fulfilled, the aging Goth was a contented Goth with strong friendships and other close ties that sufficiently granted the individual the ontological security required. The performance of any self is not expected to remain the same throughout the course of an individual's life, and the changing nature of the Goth identity as an individual grows older is certainly indicative of that.

## SUMMARY

Goths presented relatively little concern in the performance of their Goth identity on Facebook, and broadly presented a consistent form of the re-centred self whereby those with a Goth identity successfully merged their Goth self with all other audiences and performances. Whilst younger individuals had a more intensified presentation of the Goth identity, older Goths presented a more varied range of audiences, nevertheless in each case the Goth identity had been re-centred to sit amongst others. Those with a Goth identity tended to report high levels of social activity within a Goth community, or at least had well established close bonds with other Goths. Goth individuals were largely secure in their Goth identity and whilst many participants did engage with a number of 'strangers' on Facebook these tended to be arbitrary in their significance, presenting an interesting face in the crowd rather than being of some social necessity. Indeed participants articulated that there were only a handful of individuals on their Facebook networks they wanted and expected to communicate with on any meaningful level. These were not necessarily others with a Goth identity, however at least some portion of the individual's expected audience on Facebook were also Goths. As Miller, D. (2011) states "[o]nce a friend is on Facebook, it does not mean at all that they become people with whom you directly exchange comments or messages. That category remains a relatively small group of close friends... But while they may not be in constant dyadic communication, individuals will commonly observe the postings of this wider sphere" (Miller, D., 2011, p.182).

Whilst the Goth identity dominated profiles this was largely due to its subcultural nature, therefore influencing a breadth of elements in an individual's life including fashion, music and films to name but just a few and was representative of typical offline performances of the Gothic self. It was not, as seen in the eating disorder and fetish case studies, due to a perpetual need for the identity to be recognised.

# DISCUSSION

## INTRODUCTION

Having considered the data of each case study in turn it is now necessary to collate the main themes that have emerged through the analysis and where appropriate relate them to relevant sections of literature as well as the original research questions. In addition an attempt will be made to integrate data, which mostly emerged through interviews, about Facebook more widely, rather than that which emerged from specific reference to the three case studies. It has been the aim of this thesis to investigate the ways in which individuals perform their identity on Facebook and what forms of impression management are engaged with on a day to day basis in a social environment where unlike most settings multiple audiences coexist simultaneously on a relatively permanent and transparent basis. Through the data several forms of self have emerged, utilising different techniques of impression management that allow individuals to engage with a myriad of audiences with minimal clashes and repercussions. This is an endeavour that is particularly pertinent for the participants in this research who were selected due to their identification with potentially problematic identities. Broadly there were three different constructions of self emergent from the various techniques of management, these were the re-centred self, the fragmented self and a self that seemed to sit somewhere between the former management styles. Identity performance and a sense of self online are related to five key areas, impression management, recognition, friendship, community and disclosure/revelation each of which will be discussed in more detail below. Beyond that which was related by virtue of the identity being problematic, decisions surrounding impression management on Facebook seemed to be largely determined by the integration of the individual into offline communities and in conjunction with this prior levels of recognition and the ontological security.

Overall, the more that an individual was integrated into an offline community, therefore able to perform the relevant identity within a collective of likeminded and understanding others, the more likely they were to present an at least partially re-centred self on Facebook, successfully integrating multiple audiences. Within

the fetish case study this involved the sophisticated use of privacy settings to protect against accidental revelation of the identity, enabling the individual to “pass” (Goffman, 1963). Where disclosure had occurred, these techniques were still employed as a means of achieving successful “covering” (Goffman, 1963), participants articulated the need to do this out of respect for their other audiences rather than from a sense of shame. In this scenario re-centring the self concentrated on integrating meaningful relationships associated with the deviant identity into the individual’s everyday life, subsequently reinforcing the value of the friendship and by proxy maintaining recognition. For the Goth case study, arguably a less stigmatised identity, integration of Goth audience members did not rely on such separation and individuals were mostly comfortable with all audiences coexisting together without restriction. This in part may be a consequence of the “visibility” (Goffman, 1963) of the identity in that there is no point in attempting to pass when the identity is so perceptible, however there were also rarely any attempts at covering the identity either. Conversely those who had minimal community integration (seen predominantly in the fetish and eating disorder case studies) the self presented on Facebook was far more likely to be a wholly separate and fragmented self with content and audiences being orientated specifically around the problematic identity. For these individuals claims to be recognised were much more pronounced and persistent occurring frequently on any given day through status updates and photo posts, and seemed directly linked to the lack of resources to claim recognition in their offline lives.

## IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The impression management an individual engages with and the subsequent presentation of self on Facebook is the core concern of this thesis. From the research it emerged that there are multiple ways of managing identity resulting in selves that incorporate both post-modernist arguments surrounding the notion of the fragmented self (for example, Van den Berg, 2009 and Turkle, 1996) and also the more recent symbolic interactionist considerations of a re-centred self (for example, Miller, V., 2011 and as an extension of Ismael, 2007). As well as this evidence was found to support Zhao et al (2008) and Lampinen et al's (2009) claim that individuals make use of privacy settings in order to maintain the self on Facebook and keep audiences separate on a single profile. However this tended to be engaged with in quite a specific circumstance and was not a general feature of identity management on Facebook as it was seen here, confirming DiMicco's (2007) assertion that although the tools were available users generally found them too complex and requiring too much effort to engage with them. Furthermore the use of privacy settings was not necessarily to keep the audiences themselves separate, and instead orientated on keeping particular pieces of information and content hidden from the majority and accessible to the few, or as DiMicco (2007) describes it to prevent "unintended leakage" occurring. It should also be considered that observation of this process mostly occurred within the group of individuals the researcher gained outside of the official methodology, it is therefore plausible that this technique of management was being engaged with by those with fragmented selves in their other profiles (and during interviews some indicated that this was so).

As expected from individuals with a problematic identity there was a strong awareness from individuals across all profile types and case studies that they needed to engage actively with their identities and the presentation of them. Often using examples from the media, people they knew and their own lives to illustrate the repercussions of not engaging effectively with identity management. The two most common examples relatable to their personal lives were posting on Facebook when intoxicated, and also bringing relationship problems and issues onto Facebook (mostly romantic relationships but also family and friendship feuds too) confirming Miller, D.'s (2011) findings in Trinidad. It was quite rare however for the stigmatised

identity itself to be articulated as a concern in this manner; if impression management were to fail it was mostly anticipated in relation to content that could be posted by anyone. The only exception to this was from the eating disorder case study where participants were concerned that in a blackout they would post on the wrong profile or in a fit of emotion they would reveal all to their un-expectant audiences. However this seemed to very much be a condition of the eating disordered identity as such fear plagued the individuals in their offline activities as well.

Some of these concerns were directly relatable to the environment of Facebook, there appeared to be numerous forms of 'netiquette' and Facebook norms that individuals were expected to adhere to, and exasperation when others failed to do so. Miller, D. (2011) identified the shock from those who either did not or rarely used Facebook at the "deliberate and intentional use of Facebook to transform the private into the public" (Miller, D., 2011, p.172). However he failed to consider that this extends to regular users as well through expectations of what is Facebook appropriate content. Indeed the idea that online environments have different norms and expectations has been present in existing literature since the mid-1990s (Shea and Shea, 1994 and Shea, 1994 being the most prominent early examples), it is not surprising therefore that this trend is continued on Facebook. Predominantly references made to proper behaviour on Facebook related to the type of content appropriate for specifically Facebook, as above, and also the quantity of posts made (especially where posts are made about the same topic over and over). Importantly this was regardless of the audiences who were present or the identity being performed, participants often articulated general rules for Facebook applicable in any scenario.

However the data from fragmented profiles tended to imply a rather more complex relationship for the norms and expectations for content on Facebook, in that they tended to be more frequent and often very personal. In particular individuals from the eating disorder case study seemed acutely aware that the posts made on their secret profiles would not be suitable for general consumption, not only due to the identity itself but because of the emotional depth of some of their posts and pleas:

“...some of the stuff that I post here I couldn't say to my best friend and that's one of the things with fb isn't it, don't post something that you wouldn't be able to say in real life. But for most people here we don't have anywhere else we can say it I mean even online there are so many sites get shut down I don't think many people bother with them anymore, fb does it as well but its easier to find people again on here. On my better days I read some of the posts I;ve made and its embarrassing but I don't have anyone or anywhere else to turn...”

This particular participant was on a partial road to recovery from their eating disorder and certainly the posts made on her worst days were difficult to read, and there was a distinct rise in the number of posts made during these periods. Indeed during the interview she was at during her better days lucid and articulate and at her worst making little sense at all (something she persistently apologised for despite constant reassurance that she need not do so). Certainly for many of those within the eating disorder case study the need to have a secret specialised profile for the eating disorder self was mandatory as at times participants seemed to lack control over this identity and the content they posted on Facebook:

“I don't even remember that I have posted something sometimes. I'll log on and there will be all of these notifications from people commenting on some crazy rant I went on the night before. It is like there is this thing or person that takes over, that's why people call it Ana its like a living thing inside of you. Sometimes I want to delete the profile and rid my life of anything to do with it but it doesn't work like that and what if I blacked out and posted something on my other profile. Omg. It would devastate my mom she doesn't need to see that stuff”

For those who were part of the eating disorder case study there was an acknowledgement that the content and frequency of their posts was not generally in line with the rules of etiquette on Facebook. Excessive and emotional posting was not due to a lack of awareness or poor social skills but mainly due to necessity and indeed a compulsion in light of there being no other alternatives perceived to be available. Even in cases

where the identity had been previously revealed, participants were conscious of eating disordered content hurting those they were close to therefore electing to create a separate profile. However, participants were also aware that with hurt anger often follows and many participants stated that they could not cope with those closest to them being (more) angry with them: "...the last thing I need is my sister shouting at me cos of something I have posted and upsetting mum again...". Whilst tied up in feelings of guilt, these statements also relate to recognition, as the anger being directed towards the individual will also mean that recognition has ceased.

As the above alludes to, and certainly as has been seen in the analysis of each case study, alongside the general etiquette of Facebook identity management is based in part on the social norms and opinion surrounding particular identities, or at least how individuals perceive others will judge them. The more the identity is perceived as taboo or deviant and the more disruption that is perceived from revelation or disclosure of the identity then the more likely a fragmented self will be presented on Facebook. However it should be noted that concern often tended to be focused less on a wider public opinion and more to do with significant and otherwise close members of the audiences present on Facebook. This is not surprising if it is considered that Honneth (1995) places love as a fundamental component for maintaining the integrity of the self, part of recognition is to love and to feel loved in return. It matters less what a wider public think of an individual if they feel adequately loved by those who they also love; a break in love (through, for example, anger) therefore will create a great deal distress and anxiety for the individual by disrupting recognition of who we are, and importantly that who we are is 'good'. For those with a stigmatising identity then, the concern is that with its revelation they will no longer be loved, they will no longer be recognised and no longer be considered as good, in essence they will feel inhuman.

Whilst the Goth case study did reveal a wider awareness of the identity as a source of potential conflict in real life whilst engaging with the general population, this seemed to have little influence on the self presented on Facebook. Within the fetish case study for those who performed their fetish identity in a public space there was a conscious articulation of behaving with respect to public audiences so as to retain a 'good' name for the community. This is very much in line with Goffman's (1959) team performances where the group

works together in order to present a united collective identity. However this motive was not translated onto Facebook and the performance engaged with here was predominantly for the good of the individual rather than attempting to represent the community in a particular way. There was however some essence of a collective identity being maintained for those who engaged with a '+1' style of identity management whereby through mutual trust and expectation individuals made a collective *non-performance* of the fetish identity in front of non-related audiences.

Goffman's (1959) notion of performance and audience was undoubtedly present throughout the research, illustrated by participants both implicitly through their posts and interactions with each other and explicitly in the interviews. Using potentially problematic identities as the focus of case studies allowed differences in performances to be more easily identified and also gave participants a base from which to articulate their experiences. However the detriment of this method of observing identity on Facebook meant that there were likely to be some subtleties missed between the different audiences that were not part of the case study identity (it is however impossible to observe everything in any ethnographic work). It was clear however that even in the fragmented presentations of self which contained a singular audience the actual expected audience for Facebook posts was only a fraction of the total number of those on an individual's network. Individuals were not making posts with the entirety of their network in mind and rather were posting content thought to be of interest to the closest ties from within all their respective audiences, and in turn those were the individuals thought most likely to respond to or engage with the content<sup>42</sup>.

There was a reflexive process involved whereby individuals actively took account of who commented on or liked their posts, acknowledged any new additions to the responding group and reciprocated the gesture by liking or commenting on something the new responder had posted. Should this reciprocal process continue then the individuals would eventually become integrated into each other's relevant expected audiences and

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, D. (2011) found this to be the case as well, suggesting that this is not specific to those with a stigmatised identity, and that this type of audience segregation, be it only within the mind of the individual, is a general practice on Facebook. Such is interesting as Miller, D. (2011) also found that his participants readily acknowledged their casual perusing of a wider sphere of others. Yet as will be seen shortly below individuals seem to forget or neglect that these others will be doing just the same to their profiles and its content.

laid the grounds for a more meaningful relationship. This was more pronounced in fractured and secret profiles where individuals had little or no means to perform the identity in the offline, however was also evident across the board. Sometimes however, the sudden interjection by an unexpected audience member was not a welcome one, several participants expressed moments where they had forgotten certain audiences and individuals were present on their networks: "...you get so used to the same people commenting on stuff that you kinda forget anyone else can see what you post, really hits you in the face to be careful what you say sometimes".

## RECOGNITION

Although not particularly consciously or directly identified in the research by participants, recognition is a continual theme throughout the data. On a superficial level Facebook is ideal for being able to make implicit claims for recognition through photo and status posts, and even engagement with other's statements, as it provides a platform that reaches a large number of people almost instantaneously maximising the number of potential fulfillers of recognition. However it is acutely evident that it is not Facebook that generates these claims in the first place. The need for recognition very much resides in the offline world, and the lack of this need being satiated results in people venturing to online spaces in order to obtain it. Certainly the results for this research confer the arguments in existing literature concerning the use of the Internet for marginalised or discriminated groups (Finn, 1999; Bothwell, 2011; Eysenbach et al, 2004; Neal et al, 2007; Mehra et al, 2004 and Norris, 2004 amongst many more). However the data here suggests that there is more to this relationship than just being part of a marginalised group, all participants were members of a marginalised group and yet there were wildly different variations in their claims to be recognised. Overwhelmingly, it is those who have low community integration and lack strong friendship ties related to the identity in question that call for recognition most often on Facebook.

At times the incessant postings and reluctance to talk about anything other than the specific identity had an almost desperate air to them, but did not appear to be representative of a general narcissism. These were not cries for attention by any means necessary but were nearly unanimously related to the specific identity in question which the individual was unable to gain recognition for in their offline lives. In a typical Facebook environment where there are multiple audiences present such behaviour would be unlikely to be tolerated, given the articulation of norms and etiquette described by participants as a whole. However where there is a single type of audience the vast majority of who are also seeking recognition for the same identity, there is a far greater level of tolerance of what would normally be considered inappropriate content (both qualitatively and quantitatively speaking). Where these types of claims to be recognised were most feverish was in the eating disorder case study, and it should be recognised that the nature of the case study is one of obsession

(emerging from the need to control) and intense claims to be recognised are perhaps not surprising. However this trend clearly continued through the other two case studies as well for those who had very little opportunity for identity performance outside of Facebook. This included one particularly noticeable participant from the Goth case study who had been involved in an accident confining her to her house and rendering her unable to engage with any part of her self particularly well outside of Facebook. The number of posts made on a daily basis far exceeded any other participants during the research, and whilst some of this may have been simply due to boredom it was rather more like a compulsion. Post upon post would be made by the participant, of which most received little response if any at all, and in addition the posts would be remarkably similar each day indicating their habitual essence. Whilst one case does not of course illustrate sufficient evidence to draw any complete conclusions it seems possible from this instance that claims for recognition are intensified where an individual has previously been able to successfully perform an identity or identities in their offline environments and then becomes unable to do so. Certainly this would account for the highly frequent postings of young mothers (mentioned several times by participants as an example) who suddenly find themselves unable to perform various facets of their identity as they once did.

In the converse to this however those who indicated higher levels of offline community integration and strong relationships were more likely to present a re-centred self on Facebook, or at least a partially re-centred self, and make the least claims for a specific identity to be recognised. The re-centred self was mostly present within the Goth case study, to a reasonable extent in the fetish case study and barely at all in the eating disorder case study. It was to a certain extent difficult to ascertain the extent to which a re-centred self was being displayed within the Goth case study due to Goth as a subcultural identity having significant influence over a substantive amount of an individual's interests. Most of the profile content and likes were Goth orientated, be that music, films, fashion or literature, but the profile was not often intentionally set up to be exclusively Goth, there were a variety of audiences present and status updates tended to have a more general tone to them. For the most part this appeared to be an issue of age rather than the identity itself, older Goths tended to present a self that was indicative of the experiences, responsibilities and events that come with age. Nevertheless in any case where the re-centred self was performed alongside higher levels of

community integration there were much fewer claims to be recognised, as a whole and with regards to the specific identity. Claims that were made tended to be implicit rather than explicit, much less emotionally charged and more organically formed. The element of compulsion present where individuals had little offline integration for the identity was largely absent, and instead claims made were more complimentary, an aid to the maintenance of the identity rather than the sole source of its dissemination.

## FRIENDSHIP

In the most basic of forms the friendships engaged with on Facebook are direct visual representations of self and identity, it is well established that the people an individual associates with bears a direct judgement on them and relationship to them. The transference to an online space does not hinder this process, and indeed was seen frequently within the Goth case study who were the most likely to have random people from all over the world on their profiles simply because they were part of the Goth subculture and had an appealing Goth aesthetic to them. These tended to illustrate a rather static representation of self and were not identified as an individual's expected audience, which is somewhat in line with Facebook not being the main source of recognition for the identity. In this case where the identity presented little issue for the individual there was something of a mutual acceptance between individuals who did not know each other that each was present on the other's profile as a signifier of an identity, and perhaps of occasional interest rather than the likelihood of any meaningful relationship developing<sup>43</sup>.

However, in general meaningful interactions, exchanges of recognition and the expected audience for posts were more often than not identified as friends, and typically close friends. Family were certainly a feature throughout the research, however were only directly present on the more integrated profiles, the vast majority of interactions occurred between non-familial connections. During interviews families were typically mentioned in a somewhat negative light, in terms of possible repercussions of revelation of the stigmatised identity but not limited to this. Younger participants in particular expressed an additional unease at having their parents on their profiles, but also extended this to other family members of a different generation to them. This was not due to the problematic identity, rather it reflected the generally ambivalent relationships younger people tend to have with their parents and not wanting to feel as if they were constantly being 'watched' on *their* profile. The extension of this to wider family members was in part due to the expectation that they would inform the individual's parents of their antics, but also because they were seen to be a potential source of embarrassment or awkwardness in themselves – being 'older' it was anticipated (and

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<sup>43</sup> This was not the case with the eating disorder case study where the identity was highly problematic, however this will be discussed in more detail later.

sometimes proven) that their knowledge of what was 'ok' for Facebook would be substandard. However, siblings, cousins and other family members of a similar age to the individual were welcomed, unless of course it was a hidden, separate, profile for the purposes of the deviant identity. The lack of family representation on Facebook is not necessarily unusual however, as Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) found only 11.2% of their participants included family on their profile.

What was more surprising was the often clear distinction made between family and friends, that is somewhat converse to the blurred boundaries of family and friends that was identified in much of the existing literature, and more so given its prevalence amongst marginalised groups (Candy et al, 1981; Chambers, 2002; Jordan-Marsh and Harden, 2005; Oswald, 2002; Pahl and Spencer, 2001 and Weinstock, 2000). A possible explanation for this is that Facebook itself promotes the distinction between family and friends by having prefabricated groups for each, and also by having a specific section for identifying who in the individual's network is a family member and what the relationship between them is. Even within the eating disorder case study, being primarily female, highly marginalised and with little other means of expressing the identity or people to share it with, there was not any notable reference to familial like relationships with friends. Although, as already stated the family tended to be identified as sources of anxiety and often in direct conflict to the self in question rather than an aid to identity, and in this manner it is perhaps unsurprising that close friendships were not tarnished with such a negative association. Above all other relationships close friendships were identified as being highly significant features in individuals' lives, more so than even romantic relationships due to the anticipated longevity of the friendships.

More generally the literature on friendship is somewhat divided. In line with the wider arguments concerning our social relationships as argued by those such as Tönnies (2001 [1887]) and Simmel (1908) friendship is often seen as being weak and superficial, formed on highly specialised elements of self (Bauman, 2001 and Beck, 2002) and maintained only due to their continuing utility to each individual (concurrent with Giddens' transformation of intimacy). On the other hand those such as Pahl (2002) advocate a deeper essence to friendship arguing that friendship is multi-layered, based on moral obligations and expectations and ultimately one of the most meaningful relationships individuals might have in contemporary society. Whilst for the most

part the interest of friendship for this thesis concerns its utility in the formation and maintenance of identity the question of the nature of friendship is relevant. Given the emphasis on friendship by participants if these relationships are necessarily weak and shallow, easily broken and easily replaced, then this makes a considerable contribution to an individual's sense of self and will greatly affect the quality of recognition received and therefore the emotional satisfaction of ontological security. Actually what has been found here is to a certain extent a combination of both arguments, although the data does suggest that even the more superficial and transient friendships that lack the grounding elements of others can be of fundamental importance to an individual, and in some cases, without exaggeration, are a potential matter of life or death.

The majority of friendships encountered during the research process were borne of specialised interests, although this is perhaps unsurprising given the use of case studies based on particular identities. However the more integrated styles of management, re-centred to their varying extents, did display a variety of audiences and a number of different friendship groups, often from educational or employment backgrounds or other specific identity elements (being part of a sports team for example). Friendships stemming from specialised activities and identities emerged both on- and offline, and whilst both seemed likely to develop strong emotional attachments there was a key difference between them. Close friendships developed in the offline with a close physical proximity, therefore enabling face to face interaction, transgressed their specialist roots and moved into multi-layered relationships of mutual co-dependency for a variety of obligations much like the more traditional frameworks of community and friendships argued to have diminished.

Many participants acknowledged that despite the complications their problematic identity created, it was a small sacrifice for the satisfaction they gained from it and the people they had come to know through it. Often claims such as "I can't imagine my life without her" were made regarding their closest friends that had developed from a common element of self, and on occasion public adoration and thanks was made through status updates where friends had been of assistance in some manner. Or indeed changes of profile photos representing relationships with particular individuals or groups of people with qualifying statements about their friendship such as: "I love you", "I miss you guys", "always" and a particularly memorable exclamation of "ur

bitch 4ever!!!”<sup>44</sup>. Not only were these relationships strong sources of recognition and ontological security, thereby reinforcing the identity, and so continues the cycle, but they made participants genuinely happy and that was illustrated in their engagement with each other on Facebook. The close intimate friendships displayed on Facebook and further articulated by participants in interviews were not merely relationships of mutual self-interest, as Giddens would have it, and nor even in the context of this thesis were they merely a product of a cyclical relationship of identity and self. These relationships were maintained on a genuine affection and enjoyment of each other’s company; whilst they may have been surrounded by a sea of more superficial relationships their minority status does not diminish their significance.

However the development into multi-layered friendships seems somewhat dependent on the relationships being maintained within a certain geographical proximity, whilst those friendships where individuals had moved away were still meaningful they largely lost their multilevel functionality. The importance of physical proximity is seen again where meaningful friendships were generated online, in the absence of being able to do so in real life. For those in the eating disorder case study the primary function of their fragmented Facebook profile was providing a safe place in which the eating disorder identity could be performed, with an in-group who through experience could empathise and provide the support that was unavailable offline. Claims for recognition were centred on the struggle to achieve thinness and the emotional trauma of having an eating disordered self. Again, there were a large number of contacts who were of relatively superficial construction; it was only a minority that presented themselves as something more than this. Reflecting existing literature surrounding marginalised groups online, the intimate relationships formed on Facebook for those with an eating disorder were of considerable importance. Friendships do not require an offline connection in order to be meaningful, however, the friendships displayed here tended to remain distinctly specialised in the absence of face to face development. Despite their emotional closeness the content of the friendships was almost exclusively related to the eating disorder identity. Other forms of new communication technology were used to maintain the friendships and status updates were sometimes as simple as “text me”,

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<sup>44</sup> Not coincidentally this was taken from a participant in the ‘+1’ style of management in the fetish case study. The photo was fairly innocuous of the two women embracing sitting in a park, however there was evidently an ‘insider’ reference being made as the pair seemed to have a tentative D/s relationship.

but despite the change in technology conversations were still limited to the eating disorder and the provision of emotional support. However without this outlet for performance within a relatively safe environment, and without these friendships, specialised as they might be, participants seemed to have very few other options available to them. This was particularly pertinent for younger participants, still living at home, who did not have the freedom to travel to meet people face to face even if they were not geographically remote from others.

## COMMUNITY

As has been emphasized on numerous occasions community is essential for recognition and community relationships in the offline and by proxy satisfaction from being able to perform the identity in question somewhat relinquishes the need for and display of claims for recognition in the online. Indeed for those who have a significant grounding of their identity in their offline lives, there is minimal need for it to manifest as a fragmented identity and are much more likely to present at least a form of the re-centred self online. Facebook is a potentially useful tool for being able to communicate with the whole community quite easily and reinforce the community bonds in the absence of being able to do so offline. In real life where the community comes together, there are often people missing from it, and there is a mismatch of individuals within it that see each other in a more ad hoc fashion. Online, everyone can be in the same space, no one is excluded and ties can be maintained – keeping the community a community, rather than a network of nodes. However the perceived taboo and deviancy of the identity impacts upon this and the availability of specialised SNSs or other online platforms. Community relations for the fetish identity were distinctly reported to be taking place elsewhere, that being FetLife, for the eating disorder case study there was no offline community to maintain, and finally within the Goth case study community was largely dependent on the geographical location of the participant (making a community out of four Goths from a small town is difficult to achieve!).

However there was some sense of community belonging that emanated from all three case studies, as can be seen in the individual analyses, regardless of their offline existence. As a whole however being part of an online community does not appear to be in any part as effective as offline communities in regards to developing a grounded sense of self, yet in terms of emotional support they are invaluable and certainly in proffering individuals with which to develop meaningful relationships. As Whittaker remarks:

“I considered the criticism of online communities that they are no more than a simulated fantasy that sublimates the difficulties of ‘real’ community into a perfect communication between like-minded individuals... Cyberspace does not replace

the material world, but rather supplements it, and frequently does so very well...

but the desire to transform communication into community still requires embodiment..." (Whittaker, 2007, p.44).

Once again the importance of geography and physical proximity makes itself significant, and it certainly seems that much of an individual's online self is dictated by their community relations and integration in the offline, and for the development on multi-layered friendships and relationships which provide rich ground for ontological security through the process of mutual revelation. To some extent a lack of offline community, experienced by permanently vacating a particular geographical space, can be offset through the maintenance of important and significant friendships via Facebook. However these relationships without means for face to face contact will inevitably lose their holistic nature and as such a lack of offline community as a source for these types of relationships cannot be sustained indefinitely if an individual is to retain their sense of self. Thus, as Giddens proposes, the individual must actively reground themselves through the development of new relationships in order to maintain ontological security. If this does not occur, this is where we commonly see a substantial rise in the claims to be recognised made on Facebook, constant calls for attention for a self or selves that have somehow been lost, and where problematic identities are concerned the development of a fragmented self, obsessed with an identity that cannot be satiated.

## REVELATION

Revelation is, very basically, how individuals display their identities to each other – in order to receive recognition for an identity(s) from others it must be revealed to them, Giddens labels it disclosure and at other points it has been referred to as ‘talk’. Revelation is the principle that ties all of the above themes together, without a disclosure of the self an individual has no means of connection to others as the only way of truly recognising an individual is by *knowing* them, especially when it comes to the kinds of relationships that have been identified as paramount to an individual’s sense of self here. Revelation is an obligation of friendship; individuals are expected to expose their ‘inner self’ to their friends and vice versa. There may be a form of specialised sharing in this, stemming from belonging to a particular community or the friendship being born of a particular identity. However in order to develop, and maintain, close relationships friends are expected to reveal more than the role in which they are more commonly known amongst wider members of the audience or community. The level of revelation is the fundamental difference between close friends, friends and acquaintance, both quantitatively and qualitatively the expected disclosure from each of these relationships is wildly different. On Facebook, this, regardless of the engagement of a problematic identity, can easily become an issue. As has been established Facebook posts are often catered towards particular audiences, and more often than not only a particular selection of individuals within that audience that are fairly unanimously close and intimate ties; thereby creating a level of revelation on Facebook that is in all likelihood irritating or at best of no interest to the majority of others on an individual’s friends list.

As stated above there are certain implicit norms and etiquette established on Facebook in terms of a reasonable amount of posts to make and appropriate content of posts which limits the amount of emotional or ‘private’ matters that should be aired online. However of course this does not necessarily mean that individuals follow these general rules at all times, furthermore it also increases the likelihood of phatic communication where individuals are not entirely sure what acceptable content is for Facebook. Revelation is also, fairly evidently at this point, a clear means of seeking recognition on Facebook. Like recognition, revelation in friendship needs to be mutual and also balanced in accordance with what has been negotiated

between individuals. In a Facebook setting, over revelation can lead to the dissolution of relationships, incessant posting that is just noise even for close friends, and also revelation of the 'wrong things', other's secrets, relationships, arguments and so on and in this case problematic elements of self. Although there is etiquette in place, Facebook arguably makes it too easy to break these norms, accessible at all times and through a variety of different mobile devices and indeed due to participants forgetting exactly who is on their Facebook network.

Furthermore there was a somewhat ironic consistency in the complaints participants made concerning the posts of others and their banality of their own contributions, at the same time as, for example, making a point about people posting what they had for lunch their own profile content would have themselves and others GPS tagged at a restaurant. For an individual, what they are doing and who they are doing it with is of interest, as it seemed to be for their closest ties who were generally interactive with such posts even if only by 'liking' the content. To a certain extent, everyday disclosure of relatively non-important things was as an important feature in close relationships, particularly where face to face interaction was generally unavailable due to a lack of physical proximity. Being able to keep up to date with their closest friends and ties was identified as a beneficial aspect of Facebook, especially given the efficiency with which this could be done from simply looking at their own newsfeed. It did not seem to necessarily occur to participants however that such content was the very same content that bored them when it emanated from an individual on their network they were not particularly close to. Facebook does offer a useful tool for dealing with unwanted content, namely the 'hide' option which allows the individual to hide all of an other's posts or a particular type of post (for example, if someone constantly posted YouTube videos) without removing them from the network altogether.

From the research it is impossible to deny, with perhaps the exception of the eating disorder case study, that the vast majority of revelation or disclosure on Facebook was more gesture and phatic in nature, than of any substantive qualitative communication, as has been suggested by Miller, V. (2008). Yet a great deal of meaning was able to be generated from such simplistic forms of interaction by participants, be that through particular displays of identity and implicit calls for recognition by liking a page, or group, or thing, or from a

close friend sharing or re-posting the virtual object. A simple gesture which in a moment reaffirms the connection between the individuals and their shared identity(s), enabling some exchange of recognition to occur, whilst in no way approximate to spending time face to face, and indeed a mere token by its very nature, every little seemed to help towards the affirmation of the self and of a relationship. The construction or presentation of self on Facebook is largely a series of small phatic revelations or disclosures, updated and on a fairly consistent basis with the aid of others who were primarily considered to be close friends of the individual.

Grand revelations or the disclosure of private intimate moments are as a general rule frowned upon on Facebook, and indeed it can be considered that this is almost a collective form of impression management maintained by the general population of Facebook. The tacit agreement that Facebook is not an appropriate setting for anything but the trivial means that the vast majority of individuals can use Facebook to engage with multiple audiences simultaneously, and sustain a fluctuating present/absent existence, with relatively low risk. With the inclusion of a potentially problematic identity into an individual's sense of self, the manner in which the individual elects to adhere to this tacit agreement on Facebook in front of the majority of their audiences is primarily driven by their ability to successfully perform the identity offline and the strength of the relationships formed upon it. To a lesser extent the perceived deviancy of the identity and potential repercussions of its revelation relatable to an individual's more immediate and meaningful audiences, and the availability of specialised online platforms enabling an expression of the identity elsewhere in cyberspace, also work towards the use of different forms of impression management (and the subsequent types of selves developed from this).

# **THE REFLEXIVE THESIS: Research Questions, Limitations and Suggestions for**

## **Further Research**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

After reviewing the literature on identity, impression management and the Internet three main research questions emerged which broadly regarded how individuals manage their identity on Facebook, what influences an individual in their management choices, and finally what the impact the self on Facebook has for wider issues of identity. Having made an analysis of all three case studies and provided a discussion of some of the themes that collectively emerged from the data it is essential to situate the research more definitively amongst the original research questions.

#### **1. HOW DO INDIVIDUALS MANAGE THEIR IDENTITIES ON FACEBOOK WITH MULTIPLE AUDIENCES SIMULTANEOUSLY PRESENT?**

- a. Is there evidence of a re-centred self on Facebook?
- b. To what extent are early Internet theories on fragmented selves still relevant?
- c. Do any other forms of identity management manifest on Facebook?

Within the literature there was a growing consideration that an individual's identities are being forced to merge, and a single self is therefore presented on SNSs such as Facebook. This was in contrast to predominantly (although not exclusively) early Internet theories where it was thought the self became fragmented, and multiple selves were being performed in separate windows or through a distributed presence. Through the technology and platform development of Facebook itself individuals are encouraged to have multiple audiences present in a single space, and indeed there is somewhat of a social expectation for this to occur as well. Several participants indicated that they felt a pressure to accept certain friend requests due to the closeness of the tie, usually family members, but were not entirely comfortable with doing so. Sometimes, this pressure also came from already having other members of the same audience present,

and being unable to logically justify not accepting the friend request. Due to the existence of multiple simultaneously present audiences the theoretical notion of displaying a fragmented identity on Facebook made less sense than the idea of a re-centred self due to the sheer level of impression management this would involve in order to avoid conflicts between audiences. Such turbulence would in turn potentially derail the receipt of recognition, the relationships involved and ultimately an individual's sense of self and their ontological security. However the research here has very clearly indicated that the performance of a fragmented self is, for those with problematic identities, a common style of impression management. In its most extreme form it offers individuals an almost fool proof way of maintaining a self they do not wish the majority of their audiences to know about or come into 'hearing' distance of. This is achieved through the creation of a completely separate profile, with closed security settings, pseudonyms and unidentifiable profile photos. The content of these profiles was almost exclusively centred on the problematic identity, contained only a single audience and interaction and communication between individuals very rarely broached any subject other than the identity of interest. Within the use of these forms of impression management Goffman's (1963) in-group alignments can be clearly seen – the creation of a group “formed by the individual's fellow-sufferers... the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as he suffers because of having the same stigma” (Goffman, 1963, p.137).

When considering the existence of a re-centred self on Facebook it is worth reiterating that this self is not necessarily a self that encompasses *all* of an individual's identities, nor all parts of any particular self. It is a self that is constructed through the selection of identity characteristics that will allow the individual to manage multiple audiences in a single space, but continue to receive an acceptable level of recognition for the identities in their own rights. The Goth case study as a whole provided the most evidence of a re-centred self on Facebook, this identity was clearly displayed and performed on individuals profiles and in fact was in most cases an extremely dominant identity. However the presentation of self here was wildly different to the fragmented profiles described above due to the inclusion of a myriad of different audiences, including family, partners, work colleagues, ex-work colleagues, friendship groups from the past through to the present and a general wealth of others made of both closer and weaker ties. As stated previously, there is no point in

attempting to isolate the Goth identity when it is already visually apparent that the individual is a part of the subculture – this is not so for those with a fetish or eating disorder identity. The identification as a Goth traversed all other roles and performances, and as a subcultural identity largely influenced individual's cultural and consumerist associations as well. This is not to say that identification with a Goth identity renders an individual one dimensional, but it was a self that was *constant* throughout all other selves, allowing the identity to be displayed and performed in such a dominant manner. Indeed the absence of the Goth identity in this manner would have been more peculiar to the individuals' audiences and therefore potentially problematic than its presence. Again this is not to say that a Goth identity is necessarily considered normal, and the concerns expressed by participants in the Goth case study concerning wider public reaction to them resonates with this, but for those who knew them the Goth identity was normal for that individual.

During the observation of the fetish case study an alternative form of identity management came to light that was predominantly in line with the attributes of a re-centred self, but with the addition of a '+1' fetish audience. In order to achieve this individuals had to effectively engage with the privacy settings on Facebook by creating a specific contact group for their fetish audience which was then given privileged access to fetish specific content that was hidden from the rest of the individual's audiences. Importantly the fetish audience was in no way restricted from other elements of the individual's Facebook profile. This is of course a higher risk strategy than the wholly fragmented self described above, however it allowed individuals to successfully integrate and interact with all of their audiences in a single space. The success of this technique of impression management was reliant upon the tacit understanding between the individual and their fetish audience members that the fetish identity was not to be mentioned within the general forum of the individual's profile. This is evidence of Goffman's (1959) team work whereby individuals work together in order to sustain the performance of a particular shared identity, however in this case the team work together in order to preserve other roles and identities outside of that which they share. Furthermore, Goffman (1963) has argued by the merit of a shared stigmatising identity and a mutual desire for it not to be revealed concealing the identity can remain an implicit instruction, however this typically concerns fleeting or temporary encounters. For the participants here their fetish audience had to be relied upon at *all* times not to 'out' the

individual, and this is where the depth of the tie and the deep trust that came with it made a fundamental difference in the success of the practices of management involved in the '+1' identity. As a result individuals were able to comfortably maintain recognition for their fetish selves and for their other roles simultaneously, with little anxiety about their deviant identity being revealed. If anything it seemed the offline posed more cause for concern in this manner than did Facebook, despite the unusual presence of multiple audiences in this environment.

Certain features of this were also present in the Goth case study, participants grouped their Goth specific audience members together so that they could make Goth specific posts on a regular basis without clogging up non-Goth audience member's newsfeeds (thereby not becoming a nuisance and risk being designated to the 'hide' pile). The '+1' form of identity management was not seen at all in any form in the eating disorder case study. The eating disorder identity is more akin to the fetish identity when it comes to perceived repercussions of revelation of the identity and its status as a hidden identity in everyday life, however the '+1' style is unsuitable due to the distinctiveness of those in the eating disorder audiences who often displayed identity specific pseudonyms and profile images. The use of the '+1' form of management relies upon the hidden identity audience members being able to blend in amongst all other audiences without being detected as something strange or peculiar. Those from the eating disorder case study would not be able to coexist amongst other audiences for very long without creating questions and concerns. Such identifiable features however are constructed for the purpose of successfully engaging with a wholly fragmented self, and perhaps on their main Facebook profiles individuals would be able to engage with the '+1' presentation of self more successfully. However this is still dubious given the volatile and unpredictable nature of having an eating disorder identity and the limited scope of the relationships generated through it. The '+1' style of management relies a mutual knowledge of considerable depth between the individual and their '+1' audience members and the level of trust that this generates.

There was however another form of identity management on Facebook engaged with by several participants from the eating disorder case study. This involved the presentation of a partially re-centred self that was only made possible through a very restrictive set of audiences being present on the profile. As in the majority of

instances in the Goth case study the eating disorder identity was a fairly dominant one, although there was some variation in content unlike what was seen in the wholly fragmented style of management. The eating disorder audiences in these cases seemed relatively unchanged from those in the previous style of management, and seemed for the most part to be retaining a fragmented form of identity management. The peculiar thing was the inclusion of additional audiences, it was not always entirely clear who these others were or what their association was with the individual and there were too few examples of this style of management to try and draw out any patterns to make sense of these other audiences. They were however in the vast minority in terms of their numbers in comparison to the total number of eating disorder audience members, yet despite this were quite active on the individual's profile. Overall this did not appear to be a very successful way of managing the eating disorder identity as this was the only type of profile where there were any real antagonisms present between audience members. A similar sort of impression management appeared within the Goth case study where the audiences seemed limited to various friendship groups, however given the unproblematic nature of the Goth identity it did not have the same repercussions as it did within the eating disorder case study.

Overall then there are multiple ways in which individuals manage their identities whilst having multiple audiences simultaneously present which seem to move along something of a sliding scale between the fragmented and the re-centred. Having a wholly fragmented self on Facebook is likely to be a practice only utilised by those who have an identity that is in some way exceptionally problematic, in order to manage their main Facebook profiles sufficiently the individual removes the problematic identity and its audience entirely and deals with it in a separate space. The re-centred self has a strong presence as a tool for impression management on Facebook and can be used in conjunction with effective privacy settings to allow the management of more problematic identities, or simply orientate profile content towards appropriate audiences. This is not quite the same as arguments concerning windows or a distributed presence as there is a definitive core, central self being presented along a continuous stream that is accessible to all audiences at any point. Alongside this however there is, for want of a better description, 'bonus' content available to those who are members of particular audiences.

Interestingly, aside from the wholly fragmented self, there were few instances where impression management was engaged with by limiting the audiences themselves. Impression management on Facebook is predominantly centred on curbing the self to fit the audiences present, rather than altering what audiences are present to fit the self, although they can be effectively organised through information control and using the grouping technology available to allow the individual more freedom in performing particular identities. This method it would seem, would contravene role expectations and potentially cause a breakdown in recognition, however this was not the case, and in a twist of irony it was the existence of a stigmatising identity that meant recognition could continue. Everyone knew that at some point in some way that everyone else would have to alter the self being performed in order to avoid the deviant self being revealed or “looming large” (Goffman, 1963). It was an accepted consequence of having the identity and an acceptable process to occur, it was not perceived to be making a statement about the commitment to or authenticity of the identity. However, whether this would be the case in more general circumstance is not entirely clear. In theory, with a stigmatising identity not in the frame, the curbs to self would be much less dramatic or noticeable, and most people would be sensible enough to recognise that individuals behave differently in front of differing audiences. Yet without the social understanding and empathy developed from having a problematic self, audiences may be more inclined to take any alterations as a direct reflection of the meaning of the identity to the individual rather than as a necessity.

What is also of notable interest in answering this research question is the existence of Facebook etiquette, which similarly to elsewhere on the Internet, requires that individuals do not post too much too often and furthermore do not make posts that have an overtly personal nature to them. Whilst these norms are not always followed by Facebook members, as can be said of any social rules in any social setting, they do generate a type of collective Facebook impression management. It seems to be a collective process of damage limitation against a backdrop of disclosure as a fundamental feature of generating and maintaining relationships. There are circumstances, such as those that have been found here with those who display fragmented forms of self, where smaller collectives will forgo these wider Facebook norms in order to attempt to satisfy their own needs. On a more general basis however those who break these Facebook norms

become hidden from newsfeeds or worse removed from an individual's Facebook network altogether. The notion of a collective form of Facebook impression management is something that would benefit from more extensive investigation and analysis, it emerged here as a post-research thought and as such its development is unfortunately fairly limited.

## **2. WHAT INFLUENCES AN INDIVIDUAL IN THEIR IDENTITY CHOICES ON FACEBOOK?**

- a. What part do audience expectations, prominence hierarchy and social norms play in an individual's decision to display or hide certain identities?

The second research question was designed to ascertain the reasoning behind individuals' selection of a particular management style and within that what (and who) they deemed acceptable to display on their profile. With regards to social norms it was predicted that profiles that contained a wide variety of audiences and those with more open security settings would be influenced by what they perceived to be agreeable to society in general. It was also considered that even when the individual is in a space where they may shield themselves from the view of the general public it is unlikely that years of ingrained learning can be temporarily forgotten. As a general rule however it seemed that social norms and perceived public opinion of the identity bore little influence on an individual's presentation of self on Facebook, regardless of who was present amongst their audiences. Where they did present some effect was where an individual's audiences were acknowledged to be influenced in their opinion of a particular identity by a wider common perception and within the Goth case study where participants more generally articulated their experiences of displaying their identity offline.

When it came to the presentation of a potentially problematic self individuals were acutely aware of the perceptions their audiences outside of the identity had and distinctly catered their Facebook selves in a manner which avoided generating conflict or friction through the performance of the taboo self. However it is important to note that individuals mostly made references to audiences they had close ties and bonds with rather than *all* audiences that were present in their Facebook network. Indeed from the fetish case study this

appeared to extend to their presentation of self in the offline as well whereby participants were less concerned with a wider public 'knowing' about their problematic identity or witnessing its performance and more anxious about being caught by their family and close friends who did not share the identity. Within the various audiences themselves there were a selection of very close ties which individuals anticipated to be their audience for the posts they made on Facebook, and it was these people for whom Facebook content was predominantly catered towards. On some occasions however individuals were given stark reminders that their posts were viewable by a much larger range of people by the engagement of an unexpected other with their posts.

Finally is the prominence hierarchy of any given identity or performance, and it was hypothesised that this would be the most defining feature in determining how an individual manages their identity on Facebook and what identity elements are portrayed. The prominence hierarchy is somewhat determined by the quantity and quality of recognition received for a particular performance, however, it is also determined by the individual's own love and attachment to the identity. It was therefore considered plausible that identities that countered social norms and audience expectations would have a place on Facebook so long as they were governed with careful impression management so as not to interfere with the legitimacy of other performances. Certainly within the Goth case study it was abundantly clear that the Goth identity was at the top of an individual's prominence hierarchy as it was consistent across all other presentations of self, which lent to its dominance on their Facebook profiles. In many ways for those with a Goth identity it *must* be at the top of the prominence hierarchy as to be a Goth requires investment in a multitude of different ways, maintaining being a Goth is a continuous labour of love.

Indeed across all three case studies the identities in question were of considerable importance and meaning to the individual, for the eating disorder case study this was something of an unfortunate fact, but such is the nature of having an eating disorder that an individual comes to be engulfed by it in a manner that is largely out of their control. For the fetish case study there was somewhat of a mixture in terms of the fetish identity's place in individuals' prominence hierarchies. Those who engaged in the fragmented form of self seemed to be obsessed with their highly sexualised version of the identity, much like those in the eating

disorder case study. However given the lack of other identities with which to compare it to, and the difficulty in gaining insightful interviews with this particular group of participants, it is unclear exactly where in their prominence hierarchy the identity belonged. Where the identity and its audience were integrated into an individual's main Facebook profile there were some for whom fetish was important but seemed to be so in its inclusion in a more generic sexually open self rather than as an identity in its own right. However there were others for whom it was clear the identity was very high in their prominence hierarchy and considered it a way of life opposed to a purely sexual endeavour. Yet this was not at the expense of other roles and performances, and the fetish identity appeared to sit with reasonable comfort alongside other important selves without a great deal of internal conflict.

The position of an identity within an individual's prominence hierarchy, or at least the extent to which it was useful for the performance of other important identities, did account for the appearance of the identity on Facebook. However it was not the prominence hierarchy which dictated the way in which it was presented in terms of the varying forms of impression management identified above. This seemed to be fundamentally influenced by the integration of the identity in an individual's offline environment, by which it is meant the extent to which the individual is able to successfully perform the self in question on a reasonably regular basis. In turn this seemed strongly attached to their inclusion within a relevant community, providing a safe and perhaps more importantly for ontological security a consistent space in which to perform the identity amongst a knowledgeable and understanding audience. Those who were able to successfully perform the identity in their offline environments were far more likely to present a re-centred form of self on Facebook, and make less frequent and less explicit claims to be recognised. Those who were unable to do this presented a fragmented form of self with much higher calls to be recognised in a more obvious manner.

### 3. WHAT IMPACT DOES THE IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ENGAGED WITH ON FACEBOOK HAVE ON THE INDIVIDUAL?

- a. What are the consequences for an individual's claims to be recognised, relationships and ontological security?

The final aim of the thesis is to establish what the implications are of the Facebook self for individuals in their everyday life and ascertain how the performances on Facebook may be an aid, hindrance or have little effect at all in individuals' quests to be recognised, their relationships with others, and the generation of ontological security. To all intents and purposes participants across the board were successful in their impression management in so much as they avoided conflict between audiences and retained the legitimacy of their performances fairly consistently. However efficient management of the self on Facebook did not necessarily lead to successful claims to be recognised, and once again this was fundamentally linked to the ability to perform the identity in the offline. For those who already had an established sense of self, the performance of an identity on Facebook allowed an extension of relationships and their maintenance, supplementary support in recognition and a reinforcement of ontological security. The 'hard' identity work had already been done, in these cases Facebook acted as a source for 'topping up' their sense of self rather than having to generate any new feelings of security, which perhaps explains why there is such a high level of phatic communication – it does not need to be anything more than that. Where the bond between two individuals is so strong, stemming from face to face communication and an in-depth knowledge of the each other, a Facebook poke might just say all that needs to be said. Conversely for those whom had no means of performing the identity in an offline setting, and therefore no opportunity to build meaningful relationships, the interactions and performances on Facebook were *everything*. Whilst the relationships forged on Facebook for many were of vital importance (they have little else, with regards to the specific identity), Facebook is not a sufficient environment for generating meaningful and long lasting recognition or ontological security and hence why these individuals display perpetual claims to be recognised.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Whilst there were no particular disasters or unexpected occurrences during the research, aside from the elimination of the BNP case study towards the beginning of the research period, there are some considerations that need to be made as having a potential impact upon the analyses that have been made and the conclusions drawn from them. Firstly, participants were part of the research process due to their association with potentially problematic identities, and although the use of the three different case studies is well justified and indeed different types of identity were used in order to minimise homogeneity inevitably some question does remain of what about those without problematic selves? However, as stated in the methodology the presence of a stigmatised identity does not negate the need for an individual to manage their other identities. The use of problematic identities offered a starting platform from which to observe and to enquire about impression management that was accessible to both researcher and participants, and allow the path for more detailed and complex accounts to be set. As the analysis and discussion have unfolded the researcher has attempted to be clear on what was predicated in the existence of a stigmatised self, what is more broadly applicable, and indeed what appears to transcend these boundaries. Ultimately, this *is* everyday online impression management for the participants that made this research, and whilst broad generalisations cannot be made the data here does proffer some thoughts and conclusions for both the management of the stigmatised self and all of those other roles the individual must perform alongside it. Whilst it is recognised that the possession of a stigmatising self may influence the way in which an individual manages their other identities, it is also noted that there is a considerable amount of existing literature that corroborates much of what has been found here suggesting that what has been observed is not all just because of the deviant identities.

In addition the Goth case study was largely unproblematic for participants in terms of the presentation of self and impression management on Facebook. Being a popular subcultural identity with a very distinctive aesthetic style the Goth is by its very defining features a very visual and perceptible identity, removing the ability to pass, and a great amount of pride comes with not relinquishing one's Goth identity, for anybody,

therefore making attempts to cover the Goth identity seen as being anti-Goth. Certainly it seemed that the Goths' performance of the self on Facebook is likely to be more broadly representative of those without any particular deviant identity in terms of the problems for impression management this may cause. However being a subcultural identity meant that the participants' Goth identity was rather totalitarian, not from presenting a fragmented self but because it influenced everything in their lives from fashion to musical taste and even through to choice of alcoholic beverage. To be a Goth you literally have to *be* Goth. So, for all the Goth identity case study was not particularly problematic it was certainly still unique in terms of the identities individuals generally hold.

There is a case to be made for accessing a more generally representative sample of the Facebook population; however the question of how to achieve this is a common feature amongst Internet research more generally. A discernable amount of research on Facebook is conducted through American colleges, long after the release of Facebook to the general population, and otherwise targets particular cohorts of people. Certainly a way of researching Facebook without having to focus on particular sub sets of participants is an issue that needs to be collaboratively addressed by researchers, and a problem for which there does not appear to be a particularly simple solution. This is not to say of course that the research here, or elsewhere, is necessarily invalid, and certainly there are considerable consistencies in the data and results presented in this thesis to suggest that at least elements of the forms of impression management seen here are likely to be extended to those without problematic identities, most particularly the re-centred variations of self. Another related issue for this thesis was that the participant base was predominantly constructed of those who were willing to have unknowns on their Facebook profiles. As a general rule this seems to be a less common occurrence given the emphasis on pre-established networks encouraged by Facebook and statistical data which tends to illustrate that individuals construct their Facebook audience as a whole from others whom they have a connection to, even if this is only marginal. Certainly the insight that was derived from the small group of participants in the fetish case study that emerged from a chance conversation suggests that there may be something qualitatively different between those who are and those who are not actively seeking to further their audience for a particular identity. However this could also be

related to the nature of the identity itself (for Goths, you can never have too many Goth associations for example) and also the age and consequently the life experience of the individuals.

Whilst no definitive numbers can be stated as it was not monitored during the research process on any particular basis, the majority of participants were of a younger cohort. It did seem that beginning at approximately the age of twenty five participants started to make fewer explicit claims to be recognised for their case study identities and had a certain air of calm to their presentation of self. Whilst there was a mixture in both fragmented and re-centred forms of identity management in terms of age, the more provocative styles of identity management where the deviant identities were intentionally disseminated amongst multiple audiences as a means of drawing attention to the self were dominated by younger individuals. These distinctions in themselves are not of particular concern as arguably it is to be expected that younger people are more perhaps chaotic with their identities and are still experimenting with boundaries, conversely as individuals grow older and through various mechanisms gain a stronger sense of self, and have more invested in maintaining certain impressions then it is not surprising their displays of self are perhaps less dramatic. The problem can again be reduced to a question of access and of gaining a more representative sample of the Facebook population, the over twenty-fives make a substantial contribution to the population of Facebook but are also more difficult to gain access to from any public domains and certainly this difficulty seems to increase along with the individual's age. There were few participants over the age of forty in the research and in part this coincides with membership numbers dropping somewhat at this point (which is possibly related to technological ability) but also seems likely to be due to a more cautious engagement with Facebook. Once more this is not an issue only for this thesis but across the board research on Facebook tends to focus on younger individuals up to around the age of twenty-one, and again whilst initially Facebook was dominated by this age group, this is not the case now and as such a large number of people are being underrepresented in our knowledge of Facebook.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

A bias in the sample of participants in terms of their representation of the general population of Facebook has been identified as an issue for this thesis, and quite commonly amongst research on Facebook as a collective. However overall this thesis has provided a somewhat broad overview of the self on Facebook, its relationship to the offline and some of its implications, the case studies have proved invaluable for identifying relatively large scale patterns and differences between participants. The research itself was comprised of a large scale ethnography involving high numbers of participants in comparison to more traditional forms of ethnography, and as such this has lent itself to providing a detailed description of general impression management and performance of the self. Methodologically there are two designs that would be an appropriate course for future research to take given the same general interest in the presentation of self on Facebook. Firstly it is advocated that quantitative methods be used and some statistical analyses be made of the relationships present on Facebook in terms of the depth of ties, expected audiences, who is actually communicating with who and importantly how they are doing so. It was frequently felt throughout the research process that a more accurate mapping of these kinds of relationships and activities would be of considerable use for understanding the prominence hierarchies in participant's identities and who exactly participants were performing to and for. Conversely it is also argued that small scale qualitative research, but preferably within an ethnographic remit, would be highly beneficial for further understanding the relationship between offline community integration and relationships and identity performances on Facebook. The research here was mostly reliant on individual's accounts of their participation in local communities and the extent to which they had developed close ties, whilst there is no reason to doubt their descriptions it is always advantageous to witness behaviour first hand, and get a true feeling for the dynamics of any particular environment.

Beyond alternative methodologies in order to investigate the issue of identity management on Facebook there are a number of theoretical areas that emerged during the research process that could not be given the necessary attention to draw out any particular analyses. One area, already mentioned above, is the extent to

which age effects the presentation of self on Facebook, the breadth of audiences present on an individual's Facebook network, and also what individuals gain from the use of Facebook at different points in their life course. The latter in this list is perhaps the most pertinent, and could continue research from those such as Steinfield et al (2008) who identified the use of Facebook for gaining social capital amongst college students with low self-esteem and who had difficulty in establishing relationships offline. The suggestion has been made here that later in life an individual's sense of self is more established as are their friendships and bonds with others, leading to less explicit claims for recognition and more cautious presentation of self. It would seem unlikely therefore that the population on Facebook over twenty-five is using Facebook as a resource to gain social capital and increase esteem levels (with the provision that there are no extenuating identity circumstances, such as a problematic identity). The question remains open as to what exactly individuals are using Facebook for as they grow older and what they are gaining from its use, for example, is it used as a tool for keeping in touch with audiences from previous moments in time, and what is the impact of such? The doctor in Miller, D.'s (2011) suggests however that for those where old age and illness prevent previous sociality, Facebook could be an exceptionally important tool. There is also a question here about the extent to which the social expectation to have and maintain a Facebook profile influences an individual to engage with Facebook where they have no particular perceived use for it, and certainly this could be expanded to the population of Facebook as a whole. In terms of age however it is advocated that further research is conducted on the over forties as these are significantly underrepresented in the literature.

The second area that would warrant further research is the use of Facebook by different genders. There is some recent literature on the differences between males and females on SNS (for example, Magnuson and Dundes, 2008; Hoy and Milne, 2010 and Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012), and there are many others in which gender is part of the analysis, but they tend to lack a certain depth. Sociologically speaking there is surprisingly little research concerning SNS and gender, let alone Facebook specific. From the research here however particular interest has been raised in the different forms of communication used by males and females in order to engage with their Facebook audiences. Whilst a variety of forms were used by all participants there did appear to be a tendency for males to use more implicit and phatic forms of

communication with their contacts, using objects such as YouTube videos to express their current state of mind and 'liking' the posts of others rather than generating text based equivalents. In contrast it was felt that there was a propensity for female participants to be more conventionally expressive through text based communication, and also using personalised objects rather than the more removed videos and images used by males. In addition to confirmation that this is the case further research should also consider how gendered friendships are played out on Facebook, both homo- and heterogenic forms, the negotiations between male and female interactivity, and following this what the subsequent differences are for an individual's sense of self.

There are numerous other suggestions that might be made for further research of a similar kind of ilk such as class and ethnicity, however age and gender were the only two areas which emerged as requiring more insight from the data produced here. Beyond this an activity more specifically related to Facebook also warrants some further consideration, that being the process of accepting or rejecting friend requests. As mentioned above participants acknowledged that they sometimes felt pressured into accepting a friend request when they were not entirely comfortable with doing so. An interesting line of further enquiry would be what the main considerations are in accepting or rejecting a friend request, in terms of social expectations and previously existing audience members as were identified and establishing what the difference is between friend requests that individuals are happy to accept and those that create some sense of unease. This can be related to the general construction of audiences on Facebook and who is deemed a suitable audience member in comparison to others. Contrary to the statistics presented by Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) that indicated a distinct lack of family members being present on individual's profiles the family featured quite often in the networks of participants here (notwithstanding those who presented a fragmented form of self). The sample used by Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield was constructed from American college students, and this may in part explain the differences, however the inclusion of the family into an individual's Facebook network still warrants some further thought and investigation.

A final consideration for future research concerns the manner in which certain events are, with hindsight, made logical and inevitable. As stated in the literature review in terms of an individual's impression

management and the legitimacy of their performances, there can only be so many discrepancies attached to an individual before belief in the performance cannot be maintained and, in Goffman's (1963) words, the identity is spoiled. Throughout the course of the research there were, fortunately for participants, no significant occurrences of a failure to maintain a certain presentation of self that might have resulted in a fundamental questioning in the identity of the individual. There were an abundance of failed claims to be recognised, and some instances of oversharing that went against the norms of Facebook, however overall identities were relatively well managed. This leaves the question of what does happen when things go abundantly wrong? What magnitude of impression management error leads to a questioning of the self that cannot be reversed or how many times can audiences endure a discrediting information? In order to establish the answers to these questions research should also consider the inter-play between the on- and offline and the extent to which problematic transgressions of self move between the two arenas. Facebook's (2012) own statistics indicate a high number of duplicate accounts, nearly 5% of the total membership number of 1.15 billion, yet it was found here that the majority of those who displayed a fragmented self disguised their real selves through pseudonyms and unidentifiable photos. To all intents and purposes there is no way of telling that these participants also had a 'main' Facebook account and therefore do not appear to account for the statistics gained from Facebook concerning duplicate accounts. The existence of multiple accounts that are identifiable as belonging to the same individual is a curious occurrence and may be relatable to the above questions concerning catastrophic failures of impression management.

# CONCLUSION

The question of identity in modern society is a far reaching one with a variety of changes since the industrial revolution to the manner in which individuals are able and are expected to navigate their lives. There has been a decline in traditional community and the relationships that typically emerged from them which are argued to have provided individuals with a strong sense of self and ontological security. In the absence of such things and situated within a rhetoric of individualism and the juggernaut of information and 'possibilities' indicative of a globalised and technological world it is claimed that the modern individual is an anxious one. It has been the argument of this thesis that the extent to which individuals are able to construct and narrate their own lives is a highly questionable fact, and whilst does not deny the changes that have occurred within social life suggests that individuals are still fundamentally limited in the paths which they may take. Nevertheless, with regard to identity and establishing a stable state of ontological security the individual is compelled to create alternative ways of achieving this 'from the ground up', seeking new forms of communities, or at least collectives, and establishing bonds from within them. In an age of new communication technologies and instant access to billions of others many have argued that who we may interact with and how we do so has changed in quite dramatic ways. However from the onset of this work it appeared abundantly clear that the relationships which individuals form are still significantly governed at their onset by a shared geographical space. Rather than alter who we might interact with the Internet and mobile technologies have changed the manner in which we maintain our relationships, and their associative identities.

The construction and maintenance of identity is most definitively a reflexive process and one that can never be truly complete, exacerbated by the conditions of modern life aforementioned. The individual must situate themselves within an egocentric map, navigating the myriad of complexities in their experiences, their knowledge and their wider social position. The rate at which new information may enter our Joycean stream is unrivalled in the contemporary era and as such this has made our relationships with others as a means of

creating ontological security more important than ever before. The notion of having a core self however is something of a myth, instead it is a useful rhetorical and psychological tool used by individuals to establish the consistencies within and attempt to make sense of their multiple roles and performances. It can be said that with the lack of a core community central to providing the individual's ontological needs and the subsequent creation of new differentiated communities the modern individual is compelled to engage with more performances of self than they have historically. Instead of performing multiple selves within one community and audience, the individual must perform their different identities in differing contexts. Given the reflexive nature of identity these different performances will take on their own unique positions within the individual's egocentric map, attached with particular relationships, feelings and experience. The modern individual then has a considerable amount of identity work to contend to, and whilst the construction of the self has never been 'easy', it has perhaps been simpler. In addition to this, with more performances, developing mostly in separation from each other, there is an increased likelihood of one or more of these selves clashing with the others, again increasing an individual's labour of identity.

In order to successfully perform with multiple identities, roles and audiences the individual must engage with impression management of which the primary object is to create and maintain the legitimacy of the performance. First and foremost, the individual must believe in the identity that they are performing, if an actor has no conviction in the role that they are playing then they cannot expect to convince anyone else. With the assertion above that modern conditions of social life have created the conditions in which selves are more likely to be in conflict this is a pertinent issue. When the individual questions the legitimacy of their own performances, meaning that they cannot recognise their own self, the construction of ontological security is an almost futile endeavour. If such an instability in the individual's own understanding of self is not remedied the individual will enter a disturbed mental state, often emerging as the experience of anxiety and depression. There are of course times during every individual's life where they are left to question the legitimacy of their own performances, and for the most part people 'bounce back' unscathed from the ordeal. Unfortunately the manifestation of a therapeutic culture has made something of a mockery of mental illness and led to a deep stigmatisation of its genuine victims. There are some however for whom the rupture in

their sense of self is so great it ricochets throughout all of their other identities and therefore their performances leaving in its wake a broken human being and a series of bewildered audiences.

On a day to day basis however most individuals will be sufficiently convinced of the legitimacy of their own performances, instead their primary objective is to convince others of its authenticity. This is done through the conviction of the individual in their performance, as was just discussed, and secondly the consistency of the performance across time. This is not to say that performance has to remain identical to what it was ten years previously, the reflexive nature of identity does not allow this to be the case and certainly it is not expected to be so by audiences. The consistency of a performance concerns its presentation within more immediate circumstances, and its logical progression over longer periods. For example, if an actor starts a play with a Scottish accent, he would be expected to return in act two with the same accent, not a South African one. If said actor played the same role over several years then core components such as the accent would be anticipated to have remained essentially the same, perhaps improved, yet there would be some disappointment if he had not developed the role at all and it was just as it was upon its first performance. In part this is due to the expectation that the longer an individual performs a particular role then they will gain a better understanding and a deeper knowledge of that role and the context in which it is performed, subtly changing it over time.

A failure to convey the authenticity of a performance will result in its rejection by the audience, which on a repeated basis will lead to their own questioning of the self and we return to the scenario described above. In order to combat this the individual will need to reflexively consider their performance taking account of the audience's feedback, making the necessary adjustments and attempt to claim recognition from the audience again. An alternative to this is to reject the audience as being unsuitable or unable to appreciate or understand the performance and attempt to find an alternative place in which to perform the identity with a more knowledgeable or agreeable audience. In essence if we are convinced of the audiences' legitimacy then we will be more likely to internalise the negative response and reconsider our performance and knowledge of a role, on the other hand if the audiences' authenticity as recipients of the performance can be

questioned then we are more likely to retain the performance and dispose of the audience. Successful impression management is fundamentally reliant on the mutual recognition of each party as legitimately able to perform and receive the designated act, ultimately leading to a satisfactory level of ontological security.

Yet a crucial aid in being able to achieve the requirements for successful impression management is being able to keep audiences separate. By doing so each audience will comfortably believe that they are receiving the most legitimate performance by the individual and that they are in some way special or unique, it also means that potentially conflicting performances and audiences can be hidden from each other avoiding any potential repercussions for recognition and the individual's ontological needs. In this context the development and rise of Facebook is potentially highly problematic as it actively encourages its members to collate all of their audiences together in a single space, simultaneously, on an ad hoc permanent basis. Facebook's popularity extends across the globe, and for anyone with an Internet or sufficient data connection it is almost unavoidable. Indeed there is a considerably strong social expectation that an individual will have a Facebook account, and those who do not are considered a little bit odd. Facebook has an undeniably pervasive presence with 1.23 billion individuals incorporating it into their everyday social life, 757 million for whom it literally features every day (Facebook, 2013). Such a level of dominance necessarily indicates that individuals have developed means of overcoming the abundance of potential problems from situating their audiences in a single space where they are in full hearing and visible distance of each other. The fact that individuals have on a collectively large scale developed such means also suggests that Facebook is somehow genuinely useful to its members. Whilst it is unlikely to be around 'forever' there is something unique about Facebook, it has far exceeded the popularity and the longevity of any other SNS past and present and it would appear that its emphasis on existing networks has been a fundamental element of its success.

Given the above the first and foremost question of this thesis concerned the manner in which individuals successfully manage the self on Facebook with multiple audiences simultaneously present. The second element of the thesis was to ascertain what was driving individuals to present themselves in particular ways

and what influenced their particular style of impression management. Finally was consideration of what impact the presentation of self on Facebook had for an individual's wider identity management, claims to be recognised and ergo the satisfaction of ontological security. Using three case studies which each represented different types of potentially problematic identities it was found that there were multiple ways in which individuals presented themselves on Facebook, but which broadly fell into three different categories, fragmented, re-centred and a blended formula of the two referred to here as '+1'. A summary will be made of these different forms of self and the impression management techniques within them, considering with each why individuals elected to perform the self in this manner, before giving attention to the general implications of the Facebook self and its limitations.

The first form to be discussed is a wholly fragmented form of identity for which individuals created a separate profile in addition to their 'main' Facebook account dedicated to the particular case study identity. These profiles used closed security settings so that their content could only be witnessed after friend approval. In order to make them untraceable or unidentifiable to the individual's main Facebook account profile photos were mostly images disconnected from the profile owner and representative of the identity in question, although sometimes were disguised images of the individual. In addition to this instead of their real names individuals used pseudonyms which were indicative of the isolated identity. This type of profile allowed individuals to maintain a problematic identity and give explicit performances of this self amongst an audience of likeminded individuals, without, it seemed, jeopardising the legitimacy of their performances elsewhere. The content of these profiles was almost exclusively related to the problematic identity, it was very rare that individuals made any reference to other aspects of their self or life on their profile information or through more active submissions such as status posts. The fragmented self on Facebook seems to be exclusively associated with having a stigmatised self, the impression management technique of creating a wholly separate profile is not a general practice for Facebook users. Claims for the problematic identity to be recognised were very frequent within these Facebook profiles, there was an obsessive and perpetual nature to these types of posts and they appeared at least daily and often several times a day. There was a difference between the two case study identities that engaged with this type of impression management,

fetish and eating disorder, as to whether these claims were explicit (status updates, images of the self) or implicit (general photos representing the identity), however it is considered that this was perhaps due to gendered forms of communication as opposed to something essentially different about the relationship to the identity.

Those who elected to present a fragmented self on Facebook overwhelmingly lacked the opportunity or ability to perform the identity in question in their offline environments due to a lack of others with which to construct an audience. For the eating disorder case study there simply was not any form of offline community or collective of which to speak that an individual could immerse themselves in, and this is due to the nature of the identity as a medical disorder and also a considerable lack of understanding from the general public and indeed within the medical profession itself about 'what to do' with individuals with eating disorders. For the fetish case study there are communities and audiences available in the offline where a fetish identity might be performed, however these individuals elected not to do so often identifying their local fetish communities in a derogatory manner. Offline fetish audiences had been rejected as being legitimate sources with which to perform the fetish self, and it seemed the feeling was indeed mutual. Those who performed a fragmented fetish self tended to articulate and perform the identity solely in terms of its means as a source for sexual gratification, within fetish communities however the fetish identity was legitimised through a more holistic understanding of kink – it was a way of life, not a way of getting off. Despite these differences in the physical availability of a relevant community, the end result was still an inability to perform the self in the offline amongst likeminded others. For these individuals then the online was their only means of gaining any recognition or role support for the identity, which would explain why so many claims for recognition were being made.

The second type of self is the re-centred self, witnessed predominantly within the Goth case study, but also within the fetish case study. The re-centred self is a highly reflexive self whereby the individual incorporates a variety of different roles, performances and audiences onto their Facebook profile. This is achieved by selecting elements of self that are consistent but reasonably prominent (otherwise they would not be

recognised and their inclusion would be arbitrary if not mildly damaging) across their identities, as well as other non-conflicting elements, and blending them to create a single amenable self. The re-centred self although not wholly recognisable by any particular audience appeared to be largely 'good enough', so long as individuals achieved a successful balance of different elements of self that was broadly representative of their identity in the offline. Within the Goth case study this seemed to be largely achievable due to the unproblematic nature of having a Goth identity, and certainly it makes sense that a re-centred self is easier to achieve where there are no discernible conflicts between different identities. Although the Goth identity dominated individual's profiles this was not an issue for the individual or their audience members as the Goth identity was so prominent in their offline identities as well. Within the fetish case study the re-centred self was achieved in a slightly different manner in so much as the fetish identity was integrated as part of a sexually expressive self, more than it was treated as an identity its own right. Whilst this might be deemed too risky for some this is the epitome of what the re-centred self can allow on Facebook, by sliding one identity behind another it can be displayed or hidden at any time. However this does rely somewhat on the identity not being at the top end of the individual's prominence hierarchy.

Finally is the '+1' style of identity management, which makes a subtle combination of the re-centred self and the fragmented self from within the same profile. By using privacy settings and group controls to create and additional space for their case study identity audiences, individuals were able to integrate the identity into the same profile as all other selves. Members of the case study audience were free to engage with the individual on all of their usual Facebook activity, they were not separated from the individual's network in their entirety as is the case in the fragmented self. By grouping these audience members individuals were able to give attention to their case study identity and audience without interfering with their re-centred Facebook self. When the repercussions of revelation to wider audiences is perceived to be considerably detrimental the '+1' form of impression management is however fundamentally reliant on an intricate knowledge of the individual by their '+1' audience and vice versa. In these cases the bonds between individuals and their '+1' audience members are very strong, and are only a selection of the total audience for the identity engaged with in the offline.

Individuals who performed either the re-centred self or the '+1' version of it had their case study identities substantiated in offline environments, mostly some form of community, and overall made significantly fewer claims for the identity to be recognised. This brings the conclusion to the consideration of the effect of the Facebook self and its implications for wider identity and impression management. For those whose identities were well integrated in an offline environment, most preferably within a community, Facebook was a tool with which the individual could interact with multiple audiences at the same time and be able to monitor the activities of those most important to them. To do so required the construction of a self that was amenable but still recognisable to all audiences present, and individuals generally appeared more than capable of achieving this with few issues. From this success individuals gained supplementary recognition through the reinforcement of social bonds, and therefore a feeling of wellbeing through the subsequent top up of ontological security. Individuals already had satisfactory levels of recognition and ontological security from their offline social lives, the function of Facebook was almost like a social management tool, keeping up to date and in the process gaining identity boosts until the next time it could be re-ground through face to face interaction.

For those who did not already have the necessary recognition or ontological security in their offline lives, Facebook was a means for attempting to gain a sense of self and some release of the identity. Particularly for those within the eating disorder case study the relationships formed on Facebook were invaluable, providing support, friendship and care when it was inaccessible elsewhere. It is not so much that the friendships formed on Facebook were not meaningful, but however they never appeared to extend beyond the eating disorder identity. In order for ontological security to be formed and maintained, recognition must be exchanged based on a more developed understanding of the individuals involved. The emotional bond required in order to generate a fulfilling relationship was very much present, however the content was not. Facebook is not equipped for generating a long lasting and meaningful sense of self, and certainly the perpetual claims to be recognised found amongst those who presented a fragmented self are indicative of this. Facebook is designed to incorporate offline networks into the online, and most of its features work in

favour of doing so, in order to make meaning on Facebook it has to have already been established in the offline.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Firstly, subculture is understood here as culture that presents itself in opposition to mainstream or popular culture, from music to style, through to political and even religious thought and opinion. Subcultures are almost unanimously met with a degree of animosity and fear from those outside of it, and the rejection of and rejection by mainstream culture is a core component of any subculture. A subculture is deviant (to highly variant degrees however) by its very nature of being constructed in opposition to what is normal. Within a subculture individuals are given opportunity to attain cultural capital despite being unable or unwilling (by not conforming) to gain such capital in wider society. In this sense this thesis follows Gelder's (2007) six point definition of subculture, however it is also recognised that subcultures are not linear nor especially cohesive and like any cultural group there are hierarchies, fractions of thought and other groupings within them. Goth is especially representative of such inconsistencies, which can be seen not least in the very different aesthetic styles present within the subculture. Subcultures are also complex in that, particularly in modern formations, they will draw upon other subcultures and even popular culture and manipulate the selected artefact to their own uses (such as the appropriation of the cross in the Goth subculture). Therefore subcultures are not separate or detached entities, they are a reaction to their spatial and temporal environment, and indeed are liable over time to have certain elements incorporated into mainstream culture (Hip Hop and rap have been well considered in this sense – for example, Stapleton (1998) and Blair (1993)). For this thesis the Goth subculture is of interest for its distinct aesthetics that immediately identify an individual's affiliation and for their transitional but still arguably turbulent relationship with mainstream culture and society.

Deviance is very simply the violation of norms of how an individual should behave within a particular context, these expectations may be on a societal scale or more specifically related to the rules of a particular group of people. This thesis mostly considers deviance in terms of the former, however the latter also becomes apparent when considering in-group conflicts. Like subculture, deviance is spatially and temporally based, however it is more complex in this regard as even small changes in context can alter what is seen to be

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deviant behaviour. Unsurprisingly given the general focus and considerations of identity that this thesis takes deviance is generally regarded from a symbolic interactionist perspective, following Blumer's (1969) basic principles, what is deviant then is derived from a reflective account of the social interaction between the self, others, and society.

Finally, this brings us to a consideration of labelling – to be labelled a deviant, as will be seen throughout the course of this thesis, is problematic for individuals. Labelling is the identification of an individual, or an aggregate of individuals, as deviant in some manner, it is the stereotyping of that individual with certain traits or characteristics that are symbolic of the deviant label, and also the denial of that individual to be considered anything other than the deviant label. As Becker states: "Deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (Becker, 1963, p.9). Being denied any other explanation of their behaviour beyond the deviant label, the labelled individual will begin to internalise the label, ultimately resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the individual becomes a deviant in the manner which is expected of them.

<sup>ii</sup> There was a slight deviation from the standard methodology in order to gain the data presented in this section. In casual conversation with individuals who were not initially involved with research it became apparent that there was a form of impression management that was impossible to detect using the methodological strategy in place – that being those who under no circumstance would add a stranger to their Facebook network, but actively engaged with their fetish identity on their profile. Through a snowballing technique, some persuasive acquaintances and a considerable amount of negotiation eleven additional participants were recruited who would have ordinarily been obscured from the research through their decision to limit their Facebook audience to only those known in real life. Indeed this scenario is in all probability more common practice than using Facebook as a means for interacting with unknown others who happen to share a common identity/interest, and this is an acknowledged flaw with the methodology of this thesis.

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Nevertheless some insight has been able to be gained here. However access was only granted on the proviso that there would be no posts made by the researcher on the individuals' profiles, no screen shots would be taken/used, and as soon as adequate observations were made (including interviews) the researcher would remove themselves from the network. Although this diminishes some of the vivaciousness of the presentation of the data in comparison to other parts of this analysis, the format in which evidence has been provided here is congruent with ethnographies more generally. Ultimately the sacrifices were more than worth gaining data that would have otherwise been hidden.