

The 'Like' Generation:  
An Exploration of Social Networking's Influence on  
Adolescents' Productions of Gender, Identity, (Virtual)  
Capital and Technological Practices

by

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A Doctoral Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how social networking platforms influence the production of identity, status and capital amongst adolescents. This includes an exploration of how some digital communication platforms have negatively impacted on the social experiences of some teenagers and resulted in these users adapting their digital communicative practices to overcome communicative challenges. The study draws upon data collected via 9 semi-structured interviews, 9 focus groups and 84 surveys with boys and girls aged 11-16 from three schools in England. It explores specific social norms which relate to gender, and how they are negotiated within both masculine and feminine interactions through the respective practices of banter and gossip or stalking. These interactional processes are used as a means of negotiating status and of in-group inclusion and out-group rejection (Goffman, 1963). Furthermore they are important elements in the formation of relationships, identity and social capital. For Bourdieu social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1980, 2). The production of social capital is linked to an individual’s capacity to manage group norms and approved values. This study demonstrates that online displays of gender are part of adolescents’ attempts to generate social capital through gaining positive public affirmations (for example in the form of likes). This has led to a new form of capital which has been titled ‘virtual capital’, and which is revealed to be a crucial element in adolescents’ self-worth and status. Although social networking sites can facilitate the creation of these capitals, they can also simultaneously hinder their creation. Facebook’s system of widespread automatic information sharing, alongside a lack user of control in

managing the flow of data which is received and shared, has led to many teens experiencing challenges in how they produce identity and gain popularity. This has led to negative social experiences, a growing disillusionment with Facebook, and increased use of more contemporary platforms such as Snap Chat which offer a solution to these problems. Therefore this thesis presents findings on how adolescents use social networking to negotiate gender and identity, produce social status and how these attempts can be confounded by the very technology that facilitates their production.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Contemporary adolescents have a plethora of digital social networks upon which they can post, share, message, create and perform. From Facebook to Snapchat, YouTube to Instagram, each of these social networks seeks to offer users a unique way to bond with each other. 21<sup>st</sup> century teenagers are the first generation that has only ever known a digital world as part of the normative structure of society. As these digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into modern life, these adolescents have grown up alongside smartphones and high-speed messaging, and intertwined their lives with the digital affordances that these innovations deliver. Whilst previously teens conducted their social interactions solely in physical spaces like malls and restaurants, or through phone calls and texts, today's teenagers juggle their offline environments in conjunction with a virtual landscape. Relationships, critical life events, and all the minutiae of life can be filtered through the social network lens, displayed and edited to portray a consciously crafted snapshot of an individual's experiences. As a user posts more and more content, it becomes a digital representation of their identity (potentially capturing many stages of life, from births to marriages, and death) and influences how that individual engages with their social world. Whilst digital technology has many advantages in terms of communicative speed and inter-connectedness, it has also created unforeseen consequences for today's teenagers. In short, it has produced a generation that is simultaneously bound to social technology and also, as this thesis demonstrates, frustrated by the impact it has on their lives. It has created the 'Like' Generation.

This thesis contributes to sociological studies that have sought to understand how social networking has impacted on teenagers' productions of self-worth, and how digital



interaction facilitates the production of identity. Previous works have noted that sites like Facebook can emotionally affect users (Hackett, 2016; Sherman, 2016; Steers, 2014) and prompt both depression and joy depending upon the content that is shared. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly apparent that these platforms play a pivotal role in the mental and social well-being of many adolescents (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Steers, 2014).

As this influence has become recognised, fears over negative repercussions (produced by engaging through virtual platforms) have become widespread. 'Moral panics' (Cassel and Cramer, 2007; Thompson, 1998) over social networking sites are a staple feature of modern life. It is not uncommon to regularly encounter both news stories and academic investigations which seek to determine the detrimental effects of virtual interaction on users (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). As these explorations are focused on answering concerns posed by older generations, they explore issues of privacy, family life, health and delinquency. This can include explorations of sexual deviancy promoted by messaging platforms (Sales, 2015; Goggin, 2010) or how crime can be facilitated digitally (Ling, 2005).

However, whilst these messages are important, they are not reflective of the more common experience that teenagers have with the merging of their offline and online worlds. Recent studies are beginning to focus on the concerns that are expressed by the teenage user (Boyd, 2014; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Livingstone, 2008, 2009; Lincoln, 2016; Robards, 2012). This thesis seeks to add to the growing body of work that offers teenagers the opportunity to discuss what it is actually *like* to be a part of the 'like' generation and how digital interaction influences their daily social practices. In order to

better understand these ideas, this thesis draws upon research which was conducted over two years through a mixture of qualitative methods (including interviews and focus groups) and quantitative methods (including a survey). It mainly utilises data which was produced through direct conversation with teenagers who use a variety of platforms to negotiate and manage their interpersonal relationships, during one of the most critical stages of life development (Fine, 1981; Jackson, 1995). Whilst other studies seek to impose an adult agenda, this project aims to listen (empathically and without judgement) to the topics which are important to contemporary adolescents.

This leads to the notion of the 'like' generation; a phrase which attempts to convey the deep (and often polarised) value that young users place upon the symbolic social affirmations that digital networking can provide. Social networks offer an environment in which users can create a public sense of self that often portrays the very best of their perceived character (Steers, 2014). Their profiles draw upon popular cultural and social norms in an effort to present an image (or persona) which will be well received by their peers. Through negotiating group values and sharing appropriate content, users can negotiate their identity and gain a sense (through 'likes' or 'followers') of how effective their efforts are. To fully comprehend these ideas, this thesis utilises Bourdieu's (1977, 1980, 1986) concept of social capital, Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) theories of social norms and Goffman's (1959, 1967) work on identity, and applies them to these modern practices. By using these theoretical frameworks, this thesis identifies a new form of capital – 'virtual capital', and explores the intricate dynamics which produce it. It is this digital resource which is an integral part of teenage online practices and often motivates many of their actions.

The desire to accrue virtual capital is therefore influential in how adolescents utilise technological communication. The way in which they use sites like Facebook or Instagram is dominated by thoughts of how each platform (and the functions available) might aid in the creation of content which will highlight them favourably, or help them communicate successfully with peers and build important bonds. This has resulted in a number of offline interactions being expressed within an online context. For example, this thesis notes how both gossip and banter, two gender specific styles of communication, are represented virtually. These communicative practices, which are closely tied to approved gender performances and social norms, have become key elements of self-expression and play a pivotal role in the management of digital social status.

However, whilst these sites can be used to successfully manage group values and achieve a positive status, their technical design can also confound these goals. Specific functions that are inherent in some platforms, like Facebook's automatic collection and dissemination of personal information, can create unintended consequences in regards to the evolving and fluid nature of identity and relationship management. Adolescents have begun to draw upon a range of platforms, rather than structure their experience using a single platform, as some platforms are better suited at certain styles of interaction and can offer fewer social challenges. This means that by exploring these practices we can witness a shift in the technological activities common to the 'like' generation and gain a sense of how current technological constraints might influence the long-term adoption of social networks. Therefore, whilst this generation might be concerned over affirmations which are symbolised through 'likes', this may not be the form in which virtual capital always appears.

This thesis therefore provides a strong framework for understanding how social technology, identity, capital and gender intersect to form the current practices through which adolescents construct (or perceive) status and self-worth. It offers an important contribution to the available literature because it reframes a number of older theories and applies them to a contemporary field which attempts to establish the outcome of social networking upon the development of younger generations. Crucially, this work explores this field without imposing adult based concerns, and instead presents a picture of the everyday experiences of contemporary teenagers. As Lim writes:

Such research endeavours should first, avoid conflating risks and harms, and second, recognize the agency of young people and situate their mobile media use within a rich contextual account of their lived experiences... mobile media have insinuated their way into the lives of young people today and the implications of their adoption, whether for youth empowerment or youth deviance, are of considerable societal significance and warrant sustained academic attention of a multidisciplinary nature. (2013, 99-100)

In order to explore the topics outlined in this introduction, the thesis is split into the following chapters.

First, **Chapter Two** explores literature which examines the concept of identity and how a sense of 'self' can be created, in relation to both adolescence and gender. It then details how the integration of technology into society has affected the notion of identity, and

concludes by taking a closer look at how adolescents use social networking as a means to establish their personas. Within this last section there is also a brief introduction to the concept of 'moral panics' and how contemporary sociological study should value the reported experiences of teenagers instead of conducting research guided solely by adult concerns. By drawing directly upon responses from teenagers, and allowing their experiences to guide the focus of exploration, this thesis investigates social networking within the context of theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986) and social norms (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012). It draws on these ideas to understand how digital performances of self are used to create identity, status and a new form of capital: virtual capital. **Chapter Three** discusses the theoretical literature which relates to these concepts and outlines how they are applicable to understanding adolescents' use of social media. Through negotiating valued group norms online, and successfully publicly performing these ideas, adolescents are able to accrue positive social recognition from their peers. One element of these virtual performances is gender.

**Chapter Four** outlines the methodology and research design. This includes a discussion of the mixed qualitative and quantitative methods which were used, including surveys, interviews and focus groups, the challenges that were encountered regarding access, data analysis, and also the important ethical considerations that were involved in conducting research with teenagers.

**Chapter Five** explores how the boys who took part in this study used banter to negotiate masculinity, perform approved male characteristics, and order their social hierarchy. This is demonstrated in both offline and online contexts. Similarly, **Chapter Six** notes how

specific performances of gender emerge in interactions that allow female teens to construct valued feminine identities, whilst also managing status in a way that conforms with socially approved female characteristics. Both of these chapters present arguments which demonstrate examples of valued social norms and outline how these concepts relate to traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Through aligning themselves with group values, like approved notions of gender, users can accrue social capital online (e.g. in the form of 'likes') when they post content that demonstrates their acquiescence to these values. This symbolic capital feeds back into how users conduct themselves in a digital environment and how they manage interpersonal communications. **Chapter Seven** investigates this social mechanism in the context of Facebook and examines the value of likes and how they are produced. This chapter defines virtual capital and highlights how this is an important social commodity for many teens.

In order to successfully gather virtual capital, users must possess a high level of informational organisation and continually (and efficiently) use these social platforms to produce a consistent identity (Goffman, 1959, 1967) and strengthen interpersonal bonds. Whilst many social sites can be excellent for producing a digital identity, many of the functions that comprise these platforms (e.g. the automatic storing and broad dissemination of key information) can undermine this goal. **Chapter Eight** discusses the difficulties that teenagers encounter with Facebook when trying to maintain consistent and cohesive representations of self. This includes an investigation of the 'Timeline'

feature and how contradictory digital information can be used by peers to undermine present identity presentations which are crucial to relationships.

Following these discussions, this thesis explores how social networking sites can confound teenagers' social interactions and produce social tensions and feelings of angst. This has led to some sites, like Facebook, becoming increasingly disliked whilst increasing the appeal of newer innovations. **Chapter Nine** draws upon the work of the previous two chapters in examining how all of these issues have led to adolescents choosing to engage with other social sites which provide affordances for managing identity and virtual capital with less opportunity for negative social consequences. It discusses the appeal of these new sites whilst also revealing that these platforms might eventually suffer from the same issues that Facebook has encountered.

Finally, **Chapter Ten** draws all of these arguments together and uses them provide a snapshot of the digital social experiences of contemporary teenagers. It concludes the work that has been undertaken within this thesis, theorises the future impact that these ideas might have on teenage development, and addresses limitations of the study such as sampling issues and the nature of exploring contemporary technology.

Through these arguments, this thesis sets out to explore the 'Like' generation and how social networks influence adolescent productions of gender, identity, capital and technological practices.

## **Chapter Two: Identity and Social Networks**

### **Introduction**

As this study is focused upon discerning the relationship between social networking and teenage interaction, it would be remiss not to include an examination of role that identity plays in the construction of virtual profiles. Despite many fears that digital communication has supplanted traditional forms of socialisation, we might instead argue that as its popularity has grown, users have found ways in which to supplement their offline interactions with online technologies. However, in these efforts to extend the methods of interaction that are available to individuals, regardless of geographic difference and time zone, the manner in which we present our image is still bound by the ideas that govern our productions of self-offline. This is a topic which has been the focus of many studies over recent years, and will likewise feature strongly throughout this thesis. Before examining the nature of offline and online identity, it is necessary to discuss how this subject has been traditionally framed. This will provide us with an important basis with which we can compare further on. Once this has been explored, we will then cover more recent literature that has explored the merging of offline identity with online systems, in both adult and adolescent contexts.

### **Identity and Face Management**

The relationship between our perceptions of who we are, and how we wish others to see us, is complex and dependent upon a number of concepts and beliefs. The multitude of



cultures, religions, values and societal pressures we encounter each exert their own influence upon how we choose, consciously and unconsciously to interact. In each interaction which we undertake, be it in the presence of friends in the offline world or sat in front of a screen posting a Facebook status, we are constantly interlocked in a continuous renegotiation of the self amongst the presence of others and our own values (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902). The range of ways that we can present ourselves depending upon these factors means that identity has been argued to be adaptable and able to potentially suit the demands of any situation which might require a specific set of character traits; with the success of this reliant upon the individual's skills in conveying the image they desire (Tracy, 2002).

Both Goffman (1959) and Mead (1934) argue that the self is a fluid concept, under construction in every interaction we make. Within the confines of every social interaction, each person attempts to show aspects of themselves that they would have others accept. This has been termed as displaying 'face' or participating in 'face work' (Goffman, 1959). These portrayals of the individual will often be motivated by a desired outcome, or the context in which they are involved. Tracy writes that:

Face is the view of self each person seeks to uphold in an interaction. Face-threat is the challenge a person experiences in a particular situation to upholding a facet of identity that he or she cares about. (2002, 16)

For example, parents when meeting other parents might wish to appear responsible, intelligent and good carers. Through successfully displaying behaviours which match with

widely held notions about how responsible individuals act, then others might also consider them to be of this category. Whereas in a different setting, say surrounded by close friends on a social night out, the same individual might want to instead appear relaxed, easy going and open to less mature experiences. Although the identities on display are very different, they are still arguably part of the same person, who has at either point attempted to align their own self-perception with the way that others can perceive them. With the motivation of either choice being based upon how that individual wishes to be seen; fun and outgoing with friends, mature and responsible with other parents.

Charles Cooley (1902) makes great effort to highlight our use of the word “I” as a signifier for identity, citing it as a means to set oneself apart from everyone else. He believes that it is in the act of defining yourself as an individual, against the actions of others, that we create our concept of self and work to exert it in efforts to produce power and status. In ‘The Looking Glass Self’ he writes:

What we call "me," "mine," or "myself" is, then, not something separate from the general life, but the most interesting part of it, a part whose interest arises from the very fact that it is both general and individual. That is, we care for it just because it is that phase of the mind that is living and striving in the common life, trying to impress itself upon the minds of others. "I" is a militant social tendency, working to hold and enlarge its place in the general current of tendencies. (Cooley, 1902, 149-150)

If our opinion of who we are is created in deference to those around us, then the individual identity is formed not only from the desires of that person in question, but it is also driven by the interactions and experiences with those around them. These ideas are part of the “constant renegotiation” that Goffman (1959) speaks of between our own aims and the social and cultural influences of others we encounter:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (Cooley, 1902, 184)

(The specifics of how individuals engage and encounter popular norms and stereotypes, which in turn influence their own representations of these ideas, can be found in the next section which covers norm circles.)

Goffman (1959) states that for an interaction to work harmoniously, it is up to the actors involved to maintain the various performances that are in play, and the responsibility of those same actors to support the contributions made. This is the underlying basis for any prolonged and beneficial communication, as each member of the interaction (whilst attempting to bring about their own aims) allows the others sufficient time to pursue their own outcomes. Through processes like turn-taking, acknowledgment, and response, a social relationship is formed which is contextualised by the identities that have been

used in the circumstances. Goffman (1959) highlights the importance of establishing a shared discourse where both actors are not only fully involved within the interaction, but also share a joint understanding of the aims and purpose of that meeting; whilst also being subject to the same rules and behaviours that are part of the wider society to which the participants belong. So long as this joint discourse and its boundaries are maintained by everyone included, then it is possible for each individual to receive some benefit from the transaction:

When in each other's presence individuals are admirably placed to share a joint focus of attention, perceive that they do so, and perceive this perceiving. This, in conjunction with their capacity to indicate their own courses of physical action and to rapidly convey reactions to such indications from others, provides the precondition for something crucial: the sustained, intimate, coordination of action, whether in support of closely collaborative tasks or as a means of accommodating closely adjacent ones. (Goffman, 1983, 3)

The key feature in this for Goffman is the act of witnessing and being witnessed in the collaboration of communication. Issues arise when people lose their understanding of what is taking place, or do not observe the same rules as other speakers. Thus the frame of the interaction is just as important for the social construction of identity as the actors placed within it, as their contributions not only work to achieve an aim for those included but also create a necessary context for the production of self to take place.

One of the most important aspects of this process is an unspoken commitment to creating a discourse which is mutually beneficial to either side, without discrediting or inhibiting the roles being performed. When inconsistencies can be found in the acts of the individual, or when others might question the information and display that they are receiving, problems in communication can occur: “If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards” (Goffman, 1959, 50). The source and range of inconsistencies can of course be found in off-hand remarks, past historical knowledge of someone’s actions or non-verbal cues which do not correlate with verbal expressions: “Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had...” (Goffman, 1959, 56). Lapses in these performances can result in the flouting of social norms and the invocation of negative sanctions, potentially creating both offline and online repercussions for the individual. Bauman in his book ‘Identity’ states that it is:

Something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect through yet more struggle to be victorious, the truth of the precarious and forever incomplete status of identity needs to be ...suppressed and laboriously covered up. (Bauman, 2004, 16)

Maintaining these fronts can often be problematic because of how behavioural expectations (and the characteristics attached to them they carry) are linked with the values of specific groups that the individual might be aligned with. Any actions which contradict or conflict with other acts could negatively alter future interactions between

the individual and the group; discrediting current and past performances and creating future problems in establishing a desired face with that same group. Thus identity is informed by the perceived thoughts which we hold about how others might consider our actions, as well as the actual notions held by others, and subject to any lapses in either which might undermine the image which we are attempting to produce. (This is a brief explanation of the relationship between the proximal and actual norm values used by Elder-Vass (2012) which will be covered in greater depth in **Chapter Three**).

This raises questions about the “true” nature of a person, and when (if at all) someone might be just themselves; or more profoundly whether there is ever a version of the individual which is not subject to external pressures and if we are able to access it. One reading of Goffman’s work could suggest that it is only when the individual is not involved in a face-to-face interaction with others that we might be able to witness a “true” version of the self which is not manipulated for social effect. His utilization of theatrical terminology of ‘back-stage’ and ‘front-stage’ could arguably give rise to the idea that a series of conscious identity choices are always being made to present a role to assembled audiences, whilst we mask a more hidden (and “real”) self that is revealed away from the interactions at hand. This has led to questions over the validity of the communication that is created and the sincerity of an identity that is used to attain a specific purpose.

However rather than offer a contrasting set of performances, Goffman’s work uses the idea of front and back stage to add contextual relevance to an analysis of interactions and identity creation. Although the behaviours which are presented in one situation might differ from others, this does not mean to suggest that they are any less sincere. In any

setting, the individual is still striving to create the best (or most useful) image for that occasion:

Geser (2004) claims that the blurring of regions in mobile phone calls means that performances may overlap, increasing role conflict and awareness of role-play. For example, when mothers talk to their children from the work-place in 'remote mothering' (Rakow and Navarro, 1993) calls may be over-heard, complicating impression management. (Rettie, 2009, 423)

The inclusion of 'front' and 'back' provide us with an analytical reference point for the interactions that are under examination, situating one set of behaviours against another and explaining any potential differences between them. This opposes the notion of 'true' and 'false' acts, which presuppose a subjective agenda between the initial interaction and the introduction of any more. Although there may be differences in behaviour, and even conflicts in the content and message of what was said, the concept of the 'back' stage is meant as an:

Area where an individual can drop the role performed on the front stage, and prepare props, collude with other team members, or relax in privacy. These distinctions are relative; performance of self continues back stage (albeit in a different role and to a different audience), and the same area may be simultaneously the front region of one performance and the back region of another. (Rettie, 2009, 427)

Although Goffman makes many references throughout his book to the identity choices which contribute to maintaining an effective 'face', such decisions are not always intended to be explained as conscious. The roles that are enacted by the individual are just as much a combination of past experiences, social pressures and cultural inclinations which combine to produce instant and unthinking responses. To return to the theory of social norms (mentioned above and covered in the next chapter), we might use phrases that are deemed polite (please and thank you) without considering their use, having previously accepted them as the norm. Yet through using these words we will still give the impression that we are courteous and well mannered, regardless of whether we had this intention or not. Thus identity consists of far more than our conscious desires to portray our own image, or alter the perceptions of others. It is formed of a myriad of other categories and characteristics.

Karen Tracy qualifies this further by splitting the concept of identity into a number of simple categories. The first is "master identities" which are predominantly "stable and unchanging"; like ethnicity or nation or gender. Although she admits that they can "change over time and situations" they are usually "conceived as contrastive sets" (Tracy, 2002, 18) which stand out in stark contrast to others and are bound up deeply in a physical element; perhaps embodied in well known racial stereotypes. Next is "interactional identity" which deals with the roles we play in an array of situations. "For instance, Jason may be a friend in one context, an employee of Pizza plus in another, a college student, a hospital volunteer, or a husband in yet others". (Tracy, 2002, 18). Occasionally this set can be linked with the first, in say, gender specified jobs of female nurses or male fire-fighters. The similarities between this definition and Goffman's work



on the interaction order are important, as both theorists consider the role of context to be a significant part of the creation of self. Furthermore, each author links them to the more 'permanent' aspects like race and gender which also provide the foundation of this contextual framework that many interactions are based upon.

"Personal identity" is considered to be formed of the personality or attitudes of the individual and is "expected to be relatively stable and unique" (Tracy, 2002, 19). For example the football team someone supports or their favourite colour. This is often reliant upon how others perceive the individual and their efforts. If we take Cooley's (1902) understanding of the process of separating the self in deference to others, an integral part of this is whether those around us accept the self we have established and the face we have presented: "Others do not automatically grant a person's claim to be...reasonable, thoughtful, and so on" (Tracy, 2002, 19).

Tracy argues that all three of the above categories are bound together in notions like cultural behaviour (social norms) and defined by expectations about specific activities. For example, the strict adherence to religious rule of some Muslim men in Arabic countries, which prohibits women from engaging in activity seen as risqué, is a culmination of religious values, cultural ideas and personal beliefs:

What counts as expression of personal identity is going to depend on a communicator's master and interactional identities...although being fair may be valued across situations, the communicative actions that realize fairness will shift across interactional identities. (Tracy, 2002, 19)

Goffman, Tracy and Cooley's work all point to a complex system of identity production that is as much reliant upon the skill of the individual in their conscious choices, as it is on the group values, norms and histories to which they are a part of and which affect the sub-conscious efforts they might make in reaction to these factors. Whilst it might be compelling to consider identity as an entity under the sole control of the conscious brain, as the previous literature demonstrates, the decisions which we make are often a result of experiences and fears that are products of the environments we inhabit, or seek to inhabit; quick and unthinking reactions that can help or hinder our efforts to present the inner self we want others to perceive.

### **Identity and Adolescence- A Traditional Perspective**

Many theorists, as we have seen above, posit that our identity is constantly evolving. Other academics further argue that there are in fact specific periods within our development which can have a long-term impact upon the success, and overall structure, of our creation of self. Erikson, one of the most influential figures regarding identity, believes that it arises from a series of sequential development stages, each of which are characterised by specific conflicts and potential resolutions (1968, 1985). His work expands upon Freud's ideas on psychosexual development and places an overall greater emphasis on social context. He draws upon the epigenetic principle (an idea borrowed from embryology) which states that "that anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have risen to form a functional whole" (Erikson, 1968, 92) This concept is critical because Erikson believes that each identity stage must culminate in a resolution between tensions and conflicts, in order to successfully allow the individual to move to

the next stage. This is a systonic outcome. However, if they should fail to resolve the issues present within that stage, these problems will be subsumed into the next phase, and potentially lead to later developmental issues. This is labelled as a dystonic outcome. It is important to note the specific terms he uses because he takes great effort to avoid using the phrases negative or positive. Although some stages may have consequences which appear as such, each challenge can still possess the potential to form a 'successful whole' identity, because dystonic elements can create conflict and tension which, when resolved, lead to a mastery of social interaction (1968, 1985). For example, the first phase (titled as 'Trust and Mistrust') revolves around the regularity of an infant's feeding. If a young individual receives frequent feeding from their parents, they will develop a sense of trust and a vague comprehension of time (1968). On the contrary, if feeding is irregular, the dystonic outcome will be a lack of trust and comfort, that could lead to later insecurity.

For this thesis it is worth directly focusing upon the phase of adolescence that Erikson believes to be so important.

"A redefinition of one's ego-identity emerges quite commonly when major role changes occur...The ability to cope with these later identity issues that result from major changes in one's role in life may well depend on the degree of success with which one has mastered the adolescent identity crisis." (Muss, 1996 ,46)

So important is this stage for Erikson that he titled it "Identity versus Identity confusion":

“The adolescent must find an answer to the identity questions: "Where did I come from?" "Who am I?" "What do I want to become?" Identity, or a sense of sameness and continuity, must be searched for.” (Muss, 1996, 51)

To answer these questions, Erikson believes that the individual must expend conscious effort. Like Goffman (1959), he perceives identity to be a body of work that is modified and negotiated at all times, and which must be reconciled with past and present performances, as well as future ambitions. However, the adolescent phase brings with it a number of issues which further compound these challenges. As the growing individual now finds themselves less dependent upon their family, and more likely to spend time with their peers, there is a tendency to reject the teachings and instructions of older generations (Frith, 1986; Erikson, 1963). Thus, the peer group becomes instrumental in refining and exploring the adolescent sense of self, as they are seen to experience so many of the same physical and social changes that the individual is undergoing. Answers to the questions that Erikson posed above are sought within the interactions of friends and peers as individual attempts to define themselves in the eyes of others (Cooley, 1902). This can lead to a morbid pre-occupation “with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are and with the question of how to connect to earlier cultivated roles and skills with the ideal prototype of the clay” (Erikson, 1959: 89) In laymen’s terms, we might label this as the adolescent need to fit in and derive value, and validation, from those whom they respect and admire, whilst also keenly avoiding any possibility of rejection or social mockery. This can result in a dependency upon these others and a conformity to specific group norms which, out of context or set against the values of a larger social group, might seem odd, delinquent or

frivolous, and which the individual themselves might secretly abhor. Ultimately though, to uncover a mature identity, the individual must also free themselves from this wider social dependency and learn how to navigate their sense of self within the context of those individuals that really matter to them, and who align with values that they hold dear (Erikson, 1968).

Dystonic outcomes can arise when individuals are unable to pursue a sense of self in accordance with their own values, and continually seek validation from others. In some extreme cases this can lead to illegal behaviour, later emotional issues which are fostered by feelings of self-doubt and mistrust, and a continued feeling of role confusion. On the other hand, when the young adolescent can successfully accept the many versions of their past self and associated stages, set out and define a series of important values, the systonic outcome is that they can begin to comprehend who they are and what they might become.

“Only through the development of these essential components of an ego-identity can intimacy of sexual and affectionate love, deep friendship, and personal self-abandon without fear of losing ego-identity emerge and thus make possible the developmental advance to the next stage in the human life cycle” (Muss, 1996, 54)

Although Erikson set out his theories many years ago it is interesting that these issues, challenges and ideas are still common within today’s teenagers. This speaks to the value of his work and the similarities between the process of development that we have undergone throughout the intervening years. However, as this thesis will explore, there

are some contemporary changes to the adolescent experience which might alter some of Erikson's ideas and long-term outcomes. He remarks that the continued rejection of historical and social tradition, along with familial structures, can increase the likelihood of adolescents rejecting the teachings of their forebears. I would argue that the widespread adoption of social networks by teenagers, and the influence these platforms wield in the construction of identity and search for validation, means that today's parents are truly unable to provide answers to some of the challenges facing these adolescents. As these older generations have never lived or developed within the same social settings, and with the same pressures and technology, it is difficult for them provide support that is based on any personal experience. This will potentially encourage a greater dependency upon the validation of the peer network, and perhaps lead to greater systemic outcomes. Furthermore, whilst the individual might have traditionally moved on from the peer validation during the adolescent phase (after some realisation that it could be detrimental to their overall development), it can in fact be economically viable to pursue the digital attentions of others and aspire to become socially influential offline through the online world. Today, using social networks as a platform for self-promotion, in line with the widespread attentions of others, can result in a lucrative career. Indeed, social networks and associated companies have begun to leverage these presentations of self for economic value, using key individuals to shape opinions and trends, as well as harvesting the personal information that is shared online to shape new products and advertising decisions. As this technology, and these behaviours, are still relatively new, we have yet to see how these elements will impact upon the long-term development of the individuals involved in creating and consuming this new culture. These theories are something which

this thesis will seek to explore and identify whether the development of today's teenagers has truly shifted due to the presence of social networking.

### **Doing Gender**

Earlier in this chapter, Karen Tracy qualified one aspect of the self as a master category (Tracy, 2002; Hughes, 1945). This referred to facets of an individual that were “contrastive sets” and presumed to be “stable and unchanging” (Tracy, 2002, 18) One example she gives is that of gender, and at first glance such a decision might seem valid. When meeting someone for the first time, we automatically use the visual information (along with any known histories pertaining to that person) to assess and categorise them. Using cues like pitch of voice, body type and demeanour, we often presume that individual to possess a set of sexual organs that are part of a traditional classification of male or female. However, for many academics, gender and the physiological nature of sex are two very different things.

In one of the most cited articles on gender (Jurik, 2009), written by West & Zimmerman, it is stated that: “Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying females or males” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 127). For an individual to be placed in either set they must successfully produce “required identificatory displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 127). As noted above, there are indicators which we use to assume the nature of others and the ‘group’ into which they fit. However, gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and

activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 127). In other words, and to coin a phrase which both authors created, gender is seen to be something that is 'done' and is not actually prescribed from a biological orientation.

In some circumstance the perceived gender of an individual could be confused with certain the tasks or roles which they perform. For example, the stereotypes of male soldiers and female nurses illustrate that some jobs convey connotations of a defined sex. However, over the past decades these notions have been challenged due to the inclusion of 'opposite' members from either sex. These changes have altered the ideas surrounding what it means to be masculine or feminine. Conceptualizing gender through linking situated identities with a master category, prevents a detailed examination of how these constructs are produced through historical social conditions, and how they can relate to power and inequality (Thorne, 1980).

If performing gender is not directly linked to your situated role, then how is it produced? Or more importantly, how does culture impact its creation? To answer these questions we should return to the work of Goffman. He believes that our depictions of gender are not part of any "essential sexual natures" but are instead our attempts to demonstrate the sexual natures we want to convey (Goffman, 1967). We can recognise what is necessary for these productions, not because we are male or female, but just because that is part of being human. Although this is partly in keeping with the works of West & Zimmerman, and Butler, Goffman tends to view these examples as distractions from the main goal of creating the self. He speaks of them as relevant only at scheduled opportunities and most importantly, and in contrast to the works of other authors, as if



these displays are optional. West & Zimmerman contend that: “It is necessary to move beyond the notion of gender display to consider what is involved in doing gender as an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (1987, 130).

Therefore gender, rather than prescriptive or biological, is part of a constant process in which individuals navigate between societal conceptions of masculinity or femininity, norm values which are linked to these ideas, and the performances of others; often engaging as much unconsciously as consciously. Displaying a type of gender is part of ‘becoming’ something, as opposed to accessing an ontological state, which leads to creating a fluid- and constantly revised- identity (Butler, 1990):

That is, identity formation occurs ‘in accord’ with culturally-given discourses, structures and practices which, once stabilised for the subject, comes to feel as common-sense, and by which any actions, performances or behaviours of the subject appear to be acts emanating from that identity rather than constituting it.  
(Cover, 2012, 179)

Through a repetition of ideas and behaviours, the body becomes the site in which we act out the values that we associate to it. This in turn imbues us with an inner concept of self (Butler, 1993). This is important to note because it acknowledges that portrayals of male or female characteristics can be learnt and copied.

West & Zimmerman draw upon the work of Garfinkel (1967) and his case study of a transgender teenager named Agnes. Born male, Agnes underwent a number of

transformations - both physical and mental – in order to recreate her gendered identity. “She had the practical task of managing the fact that she possessed male genitalia and that she lacked the social resources a girl’s biography needed to display herself as a woman” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 131). At the time of this transformation Agnes was 17, and as such was pressured to analyse and understand the behaviours of woman around her who had already, during earlier phases of adolescence, established their feminine persona. Both sets of authors stress that this was not part of drive to ‘fake’ what ‘real’ women displayed, but instead a process to learn a form of conduct that would allow others to see her in the same way that she saw herself. Her efforts were aimed at remedying the mistake of her male genitalia, so that to those she met, who might use those common indicators of behaviour, tone and style, she would be presumed female. “...We take it for granted that sex and sex category are congruent- that knowing the latter, we can deduce the rest” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 132).

This raises issues concerning identity consistency which were noted earlier. Individuals, just like Agnes during her transition, must ensure that their present examples of self are consistent, or in keeping with, past or known performances. Discrepancies between performances can undermine current identity and discredit further roles. “Agnes had to be continually alert to actual or potential threats to the security of her sex category. Her problem was not so much living up to some prototype of essential femininity but preserving her categorization as female” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 132). With gendered roles, unless information is discovered which contradicts the characteristics or actions on display, individuals are usually categorized unconsciously into indigenous casts of male or female. At face value, when others were presented with Agnes and her feminine

appearance, due to “our cultural perspective on the properties of naturally, normally sexed persons’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 122)” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 133) she was taken to be a normal female.

For Agnes this allowed her the chance to reassign her gendered identity and reconcile the differences which had caused her discomfort. However, portraying a gender even after having possibly ‘mastered’ the cues that might place you within a sex category, is not a singular event. It is, just as with all types of identity, a continuous effort which must be edited and reformed:

While never complete or without flaw, the process of performing identity occurs within a narrative of coherence over time, motivated by a cultural demand or imperative that we are coherent, intelligible and recognisable to others in order to allow social participation and belonging. (Cover, 2012, 180 citing Butler, 1997)

Woodward (2002) notes that we are subject to certain pressures that insist we must present a depiction of ourselves that makes sense, and does not include a number of contradictory factors. As we create these facades and attempt to stick to them, so too do we expect others to do the same (West & Zimmerman, 1989). This knowledge, of the identity work of others, is part of the conscious and unconscious mechanism that drives individuals to react to norms about the correct –or incorrect- behaviours that they should follow. Elder-Vass’s work (2010) on proximal, imagined and actual norm circles provides us with an understanding of these systems (see **Chapter Three**). Often these portrayals are in keeping with popular cultural beliefs. This adds a further level of complication

alongside the need to 'shore up' (Cover, 2012) any anomalies, because the strength and variety of these beliefs can be just as contradictory as the histories that we work to hide in our present interactions. For this reason, it is impossible to definitively detail the array of cultural perceptions that merge to create the idolised standards of male or female categories, as they are prone to changing alongside the social contexts that produce them.

To return again to Agnes, her efforts to act as authentically feminine were not dependant on passing as 'female' all the time. Indeed she might have hindered her credibility were she to always behave '120 percent female' (Garfinkel, 1967). If appearing strictly 'female' was the only caveat that Agnes had needed to follow, it would presuppose that all women are only classed, both biologically and culturally, as women when they conform to correct standards. This is evidently false as many women are able to "be seen as unfeminine, but this does not make them 'unfemale'" (West & Zimmerman, 1989, 134). This is part of the debate over what makes us male or female in the first place and the dichotomy between gendered roles and sex categories. Instead Agnes was required to walk a fine line between over emphasising some characteristics, whilst under-playing others depending upon context; a situation which all individuals must copy.

The presence of inequalities between the actions of men and women was something Garfinkel noted Agnes had to overcome as she learnt the new behaviours necessary for her transformation:

It was through her fiancé that Agnes learned that sunbathing on the lawn in front of her apartment was 'offensive' (because it put her on display to other men). She also learned from his critiques of other women that she should not insist on having things her way and she should not offer her opinions or claim equality with men (Garfinkel 1967, 147-148). (Like other women in our society, Agnes learned something about power in the course of her 'education'). (West & Zimmerman, 1989, 135)

Learning to do gender is not just about performing the elements that might suit the individual, but also reacting to the values that others have concerning those roles.

### **Gender Values and Inequality**

There are numerous journals, accounts, books and studies which note the desired gender values during many time periods (Garfinkel, 1989; Widder, 2004; Zimmerman, 1989; Lakoff, 1973; Aries, 1976, 1996). A frequent theme is that these conceptions are predominantly in favour of men, and that through the act of reinforcing such popular stereotypes of masculine strength and dominance versus female subservience, we perpetrate a system that is pro-male. It is in this society that we experience the differences in pay depending upon gender, the unequal value that is placed on the words and deeds of women, and the continuing battle to ensure even the most basic of rights (Mackinnon, 1987, 1989).

Indeed for many years, until the rise of the feminist movement, this balance of power was rarely questioned. Lakoff, in her work on the nature of language development, notes that

there is a sharp contrast between the accepted phrases that boys and girls are taught to use. Boys might be encouraged to be boisterous (in behaviour and voice) whilst girls are instructed to be quieter and more conscientious, as outspoken displays are considered 'un-ladylike'. This importantly includes the use of curse words, which teenage girls are sternly discouraged from using because they are thought to be masculine. Lakoff (1973) believes that the social norms surrounding our language rules or discourse, which are encountered during adolescence, are deliberately used to prevent women from learning to speak out honestly and openly. This prohibition on swearing is not driven only by the offensive nature of the words themselves, but because such words have a power to express opinion and challenge others. The validity of this argument is debatable depending upon both the academic work that is consulted and the context it is applied to. However, Lakoff does raise questions over the underlying motivation for many gender differences that are taught throughout the development of adolescence.

It is possible that young women are instructed in their language styles seemingly to demonstrate 'proper' and appropriate behaviour. At first this would appear a kindly act, meant to allow the individual to fit in with their peers and learn the ropes of social exchange. However, if these rules are in fact part of a system of power that is constructed to prevent young females from growing into, or practicing, how to truly express themselves, then we are witnessing the devious nature of power hiding itself (Foucault, 1969, 1982). By enforcing a submissive discourse in the instruction of women, and styling this as a crucial norm, our society immediately places young girls in a weaker position than their male counterparts, who are under no such obligation to watch their language.

The justification that is used, in regards to appealing to 'lady-like' and 'proper' behaviour, masks this pivotal perpetration of power. Where those involved aware of what is perhaps taking place, they might not be so keen to acquiesce to such demands. This is part of the on-going work of feminists in bringing attention to behaviours and traditions which, although thought to be carried out because they have a prestigious history, are in fact a part of the perpetuation of gendered inequalities. Many of these beliefs are so deeply embedded in our culture, and in the way that we develop younger generations, that it is often a challenge to begin to unpick where many issues of gender difference begin and how to address them (Mackinnon, 1987).

Furthermore, just as the series of identity performances we enact are informed by subconscious choices, the biased ideas that we draw upon, and which are reinforced within society, can often seem like the natural and correct decisions:

For David Buckingham, the idea that choices are wilful, conscious and pragmatic is coterminous with modern neo-liberal consumerism in which participants are offered 'multiple possibilities to construct and fashion their own identities in increasingly creative and diverse ways' (2008: 9). Drawing on Foucault, he points out that this problematically excludes the fact that choices and the framework in which choosing 'what to be' is made are usually just effects of disciplinary power rather than self-conscious empowerment. (Cover, 2012, 183)

Thus gender and power are deeply bound to one another and can determine choices which are thought to be made individually, but are in fact still influenced by a biased and

repressive system. To understand the performances of teenagers as they go about presenting masculinity and femininity online, we must understand how these values are informed by social pressures, and the identity demands that must be satisfied in order to present a consistent and approved performance. These works will provide us with a contextual background for the exploration of some teenage behaviour within virtual platforms, and aid in exploring how these teenagers express masculinity, femininity and 'general' identity through digital environments.

### **Identity and Virtual Realities (a) - Social Games**

When exploring identity and virtual interaction it is very common to see Goffman's ideas about the presentation of self used in conjunction with discussions over how virtual inhabitants choose to display themselves. His concepts about identity choice and face management offer an effective starting point for any analysis of virtual interaction where users control a profile or avatar. No more fitting is his talk of back and front stage than when we consider the truly private, sometimes secretive, settings in which individuals base themselves as they carefully choose what to say (and whom to say it to) on a myriad of platforms. Often only allowing their responses and thoughts to enter the front stage once they are happy with how their replies might shape their social image and standing. As many of these platforms and devices allow, and are understood to allow, a delay in communication, they provide the users with chance to very carefully sculpt their identity. Offering each individual space to produce a profile which they feel will best represent them successfully; just as we might do in the 'real-world' interactions discussed above:



At one extreme, one finds the performer can be fully taken in by his own act...sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When the audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on...then for the moment at least, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the 'realness' of what is presented. (Goffman, 1959, 28)

This very neatly begins to put into focus the complex sway that virtual worlds have over their users. With each profile or tab potentially able to make the process of playing an act easier through the removal of many of the cues that might give away a facade in offline interactions. The avatar, although supposed to be a representation of the user, can embody much more or less depending upon the skill or whim of the user.

Previous studies have sought to understand the new ways in which we have adapted virtual interaction to suit modern lifestyles and how effective this transition has been; with a frequent focus on potential similarities between offline and online performances of self (Heath and Luff, 1992; Boden and Molotch, 1994; Meyrowitz, 1985). The majority of social connections which are formed online are prompted by interaction that is based within a non-virtual setting - i.e. the friends that you accept online are predominantly connected to you via frequent or face-to-face communication offline (Steinfeld et al, 2008). This is important to bear in mind, especially when we also note that to successfully portray the image you might wish to, you have to ensure that performances match with previous ideas about you, and accord with not only your present behaviours, but also those in your known past. Thus many have questioned just how virtual communication,

with its accessible database of previous actions, might influence a person's depiction of themselves. Whilst also seeking to know whether these platforms allow for a more flexible or constrained approach to identity.

A study by Huffaker and Calvert in a Georgetown university looked at around 70 web blogs created by teens (aged between 13-17): "The front page of each weblog was analyzed and scored for personally identifiable information, emotive features, sexual identity, and gendered language" (Huffaker et al, 2006). They discovered a close link with offline and online personas: "The most disclosed personal information includes first name (70%), age (67%), and contact information (61%)" (Huffaker et al, 2006). They were surprised to conclude that:

In a virtual world, where identity is flexible, why would authors choose to present themselves as they do in non-virtual worlds? Perhaps the idea of the personal journal encourages authors to reveal exactly who they are. Perhaps there is a certain sense of empowerment in revealing thoughts and feelings without hiding behind a public mask. (Huffaker et al, 2006)

The belief that because of the digital environment in which these blogs were created, teens might be able to portray themselves as alternate characters to their peers is obviously in contrast with the theories of self which we have encountered above. However, many early works that examined the increasingly popular virtual social platforms had similar conceptions about how the individual might be able to harness the privacy given to them by screen.

The starting point of these discussions was the avatar, or profile in the case of early social networking site (SNS's) reports, which is intended to act as a public representation for the user. Mark Meadows simply puts it as "an interactive, social representation of a user" (2008, 13) whilst the Oxford Dictionary offers us three definitions to pick from: a manifestation of a deity, an incarnation/emboiment of a person or idea or a movable icon representing a person in cyberspace or virtual reality graphics (Stevenson, 2010). This is not to suggest that each avatar is meant to be a God-like interpretation of the user but we might argue that often the virtual depiction we encounter is, like those projected in the real world, meant to be the very best version of ourselves.

The profile is most commonly associated with social networking applications, whilst online games or social worlds like Second Life offer people the chance to interact in fully realised virtual worlds through 3D avatars which they can choose to sculpt as you might a human body. Although the motivations of these two platforms can differ (as the multiplayer games provide objectives and task which must be completed to progress further, and SNS main role is to facilitate and build further socialisation) they both share the same fundamental need to offer an identity in a social context. T.L Taylor, who undertook a large ethnographic project within the "Everquest" universe, writes how:

As is always the case with shared virtual environments, how you choose to represent yourself has meaningful implications psychologically and socially...The instruction manual that came with the game gave some basic ideas about how races and classes combine to make characters, but just as important for me was

the character-creation screen which allows experimentation with which combinations worked and what different characters looked like. (Taylor, 2006, 12)

She remarks upon how confusing it can be to try and struggle through the process of creation when offered with a near infinite number of choices. Revealing that in her choices, like many others, she used what she saw as 'herself' as an identity baseline:

While I did not know much about Necromancers, my nightowl-ish tendencies made me think it would be fitting. In this way I was using the game as an opportunity to experiment, but my choices also were shaped by some reflection of what might be 'more me'. (Taylor, 2006, 12-14)

The use of personal characteristics to inform choices in times of confusion, especially in a strange setting, is probably not remarkable but it has a massive impact upon the virtual avatar. From the outset, the user is offering more of themselves online than they might think, purely through a reflexive action. Although for Tom Boellstorff this symbiotic relationship is natural. Indeed his definition of what is virtual is more profound than others might utilise:

It is in being virtual that we are human; since it is human nature to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being. Culture is our 'killer app'; we are virtually human. (Boellstorff, 2010, 5)

Second Life's status as an 'online social site' could possibly, in his eyes, be seen as just another social arena, not an extension or modification, but merely an extra add on.

To take this further would suggest that there should be no exclamation of horror about someone living out a life online, or becoming another version of themselves, as this is just as much a place to engage in a 'fictitious' visage. Interestingly, as Goffman points out in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask...everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...it is in these roles that we know are ourselves. (1959, 30)

Writing nearly 20 years ago, at the rise of the information age, Sherry Turkle in reference to the desktop screen further states:

I feel no sense of unreality in my relationship to any of these objects. The culture of simulation encourages me to take what I see on the screen 'at interface value'...if it works for you, it has all the reality it needs. (1996, 24)

Turkle examined the appeal of digital realms with many who were involved with the original form of digital representation in multi-user domains (MUDs), text based virtual worlds, and *Myst*<sup>1</sup>. Although they pre-date the extensive visual element that we now find

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<sup>1</sup> These three terms refer to early collaborative games where users would complete challenges and missions as a group, via separate computers. Whilst the first two relied only on text, *Myst* was one of the first visually interactive games that was popular with computer users.

common, these domains still have a large relevance to the topic: “MUD players are MUD authors, the creators as well as consumers of media content....not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle, 1996, 11).

In an interview with a college junior named Doug, Turkle shows how his many role playing characters (four in total) on MUDs allow him the opportunity to explore aspects of what he see’s as his ‘original’ personality; whether this is through gender swapping to a ‘seductive woman’, ‘a macho, cowboy type’ or a rabbit. “I split my mind. I’m getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more...I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window” (Turkle, 1996, 13). Doug would seem to be a further piece of evidence in the argument that virtual involvement is just an extension of offline social interaction, with the same outcomes and developments we find in the constant renegotiation of self (Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, he also displays feelings of negativity about his identity within Real world and a desire to radically modify who he is. “RL is just one more window,” he repeats, “and its not usually my best one” (Turkle, 1996, 13). It is a method of escapism, a concept the media has often been quick to sensationalise when talking about the online ‘issue’.

However for Julie, another interviewee within the project, her online experiences and “her role-playing is psychologically constructive” (Turkle, 1996, 188). Whereas Doug interacts with the other traits that he thinks are a deeper part of him, Julie consciously acknowledges them in order to reach new levels of understanding. Having experienced issues with her mother, Julie shaped her persona to feel the conflict she had from both sides. Turkle argues that: “Role-playing games can serve in this evocative capacity

because they stand betwixt and between the unreal and the real; they are a game and something more” (1996, 188). For Gordon, who had problems fitting in and making friends as a teenager, in a visit to India “people didn’t know he was unpopular...He was struck by the advantages of a fresh start, of leaving old baggage behind” (Turkle, 1996, 190). Playing on MUDs facilitated Gordon’s own continual process of psychological renegotiation but like the others, although they are not strictly true copies of themselves, this does not mean they aren’t part of the total user. Although he experiments with gender, which is by far easier to do online than offline, he is still bound in his mental process of creation by his physicality: “In this way, there is relationship among his different personae; they are each an aspect of himself” (Turkle, 1996, 1990).

A study conducted in 2010 by Kafai, Fields and Cook allows some comparison between the accounts given above about adults, when exploring how identity featured in the creation of teenagers’ avatars. They examined how and why certain avatars were formed in ‘Whyville’ (a teenage only social site) and the main activities which were performed by users: “Social interactions...the highlight for most Whyvillians...consist primarily of ymailing (the Whyville version of email) and chatting on the site where users are visible to each other on the screen as floating faces” (Kafai et al, 2010, 3). Moreover:

The general consensus among Whyvillians (the citizens of the virtual community of Whyville) is that earning a good salary and thus procuring a large number of clams to spend on face parts or other goods is essential for fully participating in the Whyville community. (Kafai et al, 2010, 3)

Whyville could be seen as the more adolescent version of online environments like Second Life, with the same focus on the actual involvement between characters and how each avatar is designed. For the users of Whyville, the appearance of their avatar was deemed to be as valuable as their offline persona:

Players consider appearance to be important in Whyville for making friends and flirting with members of the opposite sex. In other words, looking “good” is a way of demonstrating social status and more likely to get people to talk to you. (Kafai et al, 2010, 3)

The aim is always to have the potential best look for your avatar, to give you the social edge over your fellow ‘Whyvillians’. Although as the research found, this is not always achieved conventionally:

Kelly’s answer of the obvious, ‘I don’t have a bear head’, demonstrates the falsity of this question. While we as researchers had assumed that there was intentional and explicit physical rendering of oneself ...Kelly firmly shut down our prior assumption. (Kafai, 2010, 5)

Between the mix of avatars there was a range of different relationships, some displaying interests in hobbies, television shows, nationalities and others facilitating involvement in a group that they wish they were part of in the real world:



Similar to fashion trends in 'real' life, certain face parts or looks came to be popular on Whyville, selling out at Akbar's and finding their way on to many avatars... [the] boy's reasoning for buying parts was not necessarily because they looked good or fit his personality but because they were popular. (Kafai et al, 2010, 6)

Conversely there were those who wanted to still appear individual in the face of the mainstream, though we could argue that their 'face' is actually based off the reverse of the 'popular'. Similarly, as there was the chance to explore any identity, some chose to change gender to virtually express and live out the role of the opposite sex:

...[my second account] is a girl account that I use to trick people that I don't like...if they mess with me I um – I don't know, I do something to them.' So beyond monetary motives, some teens invested in addition avatars for fun or to disguise themselves amongst friends. (Kafai et al, 2010, 6)

In this setting these teens were able to experiment with identity in a more open manner than in the virtual landscapes which adults frequented. However it is important to note that overall aim of using image to construct and conform to popular ideals was still the motivation. Although sites like Whyville and Second Life differ in their purpose from SNS, they still highlight how users value their identity, and its creation, in a manner which is very similar to that of an offline social environment. However it is worth exploring the exact degrees by which the relationship with experimentation and direct representation are managed online, in the context of relationships which the individual is attempting to

maintain successfully across many platforms. Especially for those teenagers who are seeking to create an increase in their perceived peer status through supplementing their offline interactions with virtual communication via profiles or avatars.

### **Identity and Virtual Realities (b) - Social Networking Sites**

During the initial integration of social networking into society, many investigations (especially those focused upon adolescent practices) were guided by the worried concerns of an older generation. Educators, politicians and parents were amongst a large number of individuals who were, and arguably still are, anxious to know if such platforms were safe and productive.

A typical example of these worries manifesting into a social analysis, can be found in a paper by O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson. Their work sets out a series of guidelines that seek to aid parents in negotiating the relationship between adolescent user and social network. Crucially their paper includes a specific breakdown of the perceived ‘health’ benefits and negatives that teenagers can experience from frequent online interaction. Some of the advantages they cite are “a growth of ideas”, “expansion of one’s online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds” and a “fostering of one’s individual identity and unique social skills” (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011, 801). Conversely the disadvantages, which are focused upon in greater depth, include risks produced by ‘sexting’, cyber bullying, Facebook linked depression, privacy concerns and pressures from online advertising (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Near the beginning of the paper, the authors write:

Because of their limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure, children and adolescents are at some risk as they navigate and experiment with social media...Many parents today use technology incredibly well and feel comfortable and capable with the programs and online venues that their children and adolescents are using. Nevertheless, some parents may find it difficult to relate to their digitally savvy youngsters. (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011, 801)

In a similar health-focused vein, a study by Steers et al, (2014), attempts to analyse if any links can be found between Facebook usage and depression. It explores how some individuals use Facebook to make personal comparisons between their friends. Steers et al, note that social sites are often places where people tend to post only the best versions of themselves: “That is, many individuals on Facebook may be sharing only positive and/or self-enhancing news but not fully disclosing their daily struggles in order to appear more socially desirable” (2014, 723) Whilst this form of identity construction might be positive for the user, it can lead to others feeling inadequate because they believe their own social lives do not match up:

This emotional pluralistic ignorance combined with Facebook social comparisons based upon their friend’s highlight reels, could potentially provoke or exacerbate negative emotions and cognitions, and thus, contribute to greater depressive symptoms. (Steers et al, 2014, 724)

Although this study is not conclusive, it does indicate a correlation between Facebook and negative social comparisons, which lead to low self-esteem. This study also found that participants who spent more time logged onto Facebook, tended to make more negative comparisons. Individuals who were noted to be depressive in personality were specifically linked to making assumptions and comparisons which were negative: “People who spend more time on Facebook on a daily basis people are more likely to compare themselves to others and in turn report greater daily depressive symptoms (regardless of gender)” (Steers et al, 2014, 726).

These are typical examples of studies which aim to set out acceptable standards of practice for teenagers, or provide health answers which are prompted by adult concerns (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Haddon, 2015). However other works have been able to provide answers as to how social norms and practices are reproduced digitally (Bakardjieva, 2005; Silverstone, 2006), how such spaces construct or regulate patterns of behaviour (Boyd, 2006; Sundén, 2003), and how identity is reconstituted and performed via profiles (Livingstone, 2008; Cover 2012). As the concept of identity is integral to this thesis, and has already been introduced in the early part of this chapter, it is vital to explore literature that has already explored its role within the relationship of social networking and adolescence.

Sian Lincoln in her paper, *“Being strategic and taking control: Bedrooms, Social network sites and the narratives of growing up”*, explores the similarities between the bedroom and the profile. Her comparison between a physical and a virtual space relies upon spatial metaphors. These metaphors “help to demonstrate both a blurring between the

online/offline dichotomy that has emerged over the past two decades and the continuities in self-presentation and self-documentation using a variety of online and offline spaces (Day Good, 2013, 570)” (Lincoln, 2016, 929). By framing adolescent behaviour with these metaphors, Lincoln is able to draw parallels between specific offline and online practices that teenagers use to establish their identity and create a ‘growing up’ narrative (2016) through these spaces. By drawing on the work of Goffman (1959, 1967) she states that both the bedroom and the profile provide a stage where individuals can enact a specific role, and define the audience that is privy to their performance:

...individuals in both spaces are clearly exercising a similar kind of symbolic and practical control over the content in these spaces. That is, they are making strategic decisions around who to give access to these spaces (practical control) and strategic decisions around how to perform a sense of self through symbolic disclosures like profile pictures and autobiographical ‘about me’ text (symbolic control). (Lincoln, 2016, 932)

In conjunction with work conducted by Robards (2012), who has investigated adolescents and MySpace, Lincoln writes that users can be placed upon a spectrum of presentation. Some teenagers reported choosing a minimalistic sense of style that did not reveal much about their character, in both their bedrooms and profiles. Others frequently updated their virtual spaces and bedrooms with decorations that symbolically represented a developing personality, whilst many more existed in between either of these points:

Not being seen to care, or describing yourself as not caring about the goings-on of Facebook in an interview scenario, could in fact coherently (even by way of contradiction) run alongside very active back-stage impression management practices. (Lincoln, 2016, 933)

One of the most striking elements of Lincoln's work is her investigation into how social networks can complicate identity production: "Facebook blurs traditional lines between what is private and what is public, while often complicating social relations by naming them and making them visible" (Lincoln, 2014, 1047). The public visibility that social networks provide, in regards to interpersonal relationships and identity performances, has a direct impact upon how these users manage their digital content. As identity is often specific to certain environments, and social networks can make group distinctions or audiences hard to define, there is always the risk that shared inconsistent information will undermine present performances. Although one post might resonate with some online peers, it could simultaneously damage the user's social face if it contradicts key identity information that is linked to a different group.

Lincoln (2016) tells the story of Brad, who used Facebook to communicate with a number of girls and build close relationships. As his messages with these girls were only 'quasi-private', having been posted on the public 'wall', a number of work colleagues were able to witness the exchanges. This resulted in him being ridiculed, and suffering a blow to his masculine social status when they printed out his emotional comments and confronted him.

Lincoln's work highlights that social networking sites can provide excellent spaces for the creation of identity. However, because they also make privacy difficult to fully negotiate and often share information in unintended directions, they can create unforeseen social consequences when two or more separate identity performances are drawn into conflict. "In this scenario, young people are managing their identities across multiple contexts within which they have to think and rethink their strategies of control, sometimes in the context of embarrassment" (Lincoln, 2016, 936).

In another piece that examines social construction, Ringrose and Harvey (2015) examine the experiences of students who used BBM (Blackberry Messenger) to message one another. Their work "explores how these new digital affordances...are transforming the gendered and sexual relationalities of networked teens" (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015, 201). They report that their participants valued mobile communication as it offered a platform that was less monitored by adults. This created an environment where they could experiment with group values and gendered ideas. Within their responses, adolescents were keen to point out that each platform offered its own rules and practices, and that certain sites were more suited to achieving specific goals. Some sites were better for sharing close moments via photos, whilst others focused on group coordination via text based messaging. Importantly, in the context of their work, some platforms (like BBM) were renowned as good ways to 'hooking up' or connect with the opposite sex. This meant that gendered performances were a crucial element within many interactions, as both male and female users attempted to negotiate what was acceptable online. This included an exploration of girls who shared intimate physical

images via BBM, and the boys who would try and obtain these messages through a mixture of methods:

These negotiations were often fun, yet this was blurred by risks, given that some broadcasts and requests led to a lack of control over personal information, and to a material and embodied threat of being found in your neighbourhood. (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015, 222)

Alongside these discussions were responses which detailed how boys attempted to embody the ideal man through digital platforms. This could often include using the aforementioned intimate female images as a symbolic cache of masculine capital, which would be openly shared with other male peers to bolster social status through associations with sexual prowess. All of these practices were part of adolescent's negotiations with gendered ideals, which influenced the perceived male and female characteristics that they believed were acceptable within their community:

Many of the examples are reminiscent of older patterns of sexualised...difference making and gendered power relations in teen peer cultures. Perhaps what is 'new' about new media is how the digital affordances add more layers to how gendered and sexual power relations, embodiment and identity, work in teens' now networked peer cultures. (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015, 221)

Despite the worries that many parents might have when hearing about these digital teenage interactions, these works provide important examples of adolescents



constructing their own spaces (with their own specific rules and terms) through an array of technological platforms. As Lincoln writes:

The evidence discussed here suggests that young people are being strategic in the way they manage a sense of self online, contrary to broader discussions that frame young people as not concerned about privacy or 'taking control' of their presence on the social web. In this respect, young people are managing the 'walls' on which they are representing their online and offline selves within a challenging framework of context collapse and through various strategies of both practical and symbolic control. (Lincoln, 2016, 941)

Research conducted by Sonia Livingstone (2008), further supports Lincoln's argument that social networks facilitate the co-construction of identity in a non-adult space. In a journal article on risky behaviour in virtual spaces, Livingstone notes (in a similar sentiment to Charles Cooley (1902) in the *"Looking Glass Self"*) that the profile is not just an informative reference of an individual's preferences and tastes. Instead it is a presentation that is created within the context of the network it inhabits:

Thus his profile is meaningful to him not as a means of displaying personal information about him to the world, as often supposed, but precisely because the jokey content is evidence of his lively and trusting relations with his brothers and friends. (Livingstone, 2008, 400)

Liu adds to this concept in his work when he states that digital profiles are 'willful acts of context creation' (2008, 254), that forge a sense of self through the negotiation of the

user's persona and the shared social norms of the peer group (Liu, 2008, 261–262). This means that the content contained within a collection of adolescent profiles is created in the absence of older authority figures, and thus guided by the values which are important to that teen community. As there is an obvious difference between the tastes that might constitute an adult network versus a teenage social group, Livingstone believes that the digital behaviour of teenager's users can often be perceived to be risky. This is namely due to the level of information that is displayed which adults might deem personal. These fears are compounded by the lack of digital competence that some adults display. As we have noted, this makes these sites an ideal environment for teens to enact their own social worlds (Giddens, 1991) and experiment with norms (Hope, 2007) away from the gaze of guardians who are not always comfortable online. These factors likely contribute to the moral panics that have been noted above:

Hence, for teenagers, the online realm may be adopted enthusiastically because it represents 'their' space, visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance, an exciting yet relatively safe opportunity to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence. (Livingstone, 2008, 369)

Moral panics regarding technology and youth are not a new occurrence. With every addition to society that generates an interest from younger generations (like the television or the mobile phone) there are always concerns that such devices will negatively influence young individuals, and incite deviant and socially damaging behaviour (Lumsden, 2009). Haddon defines this as the pursuit of the 'risk agenda' and writes:

There is a substantial body of writing about potential negative aspects of youth online, but to put that in perspective, researchers have pointed out that these echo a long history of concerns about youth generally, and, specifically, about their experience of each new ICT (Critcher, 2008). (Haddon, 2015, 6)

However, we might refer to these fears as a moral panic.: “Moral panics refer to the social anxiety that results when media, public opinion, interest groups and authorities converge around an issue that is deemed to be of societal concern (Thompson, 1998)” (Lim, 2013, 97). Notable panics, which are shaped by a mixture of media attention and public opinion (Drotner, 1992), include furore over video games, child abuse and AIDS (Critcher, 2003). As social networking has risen to prominence in the last decade, these panics have grown to include sexting, cyber-bullying, depression and criminal activity co-ordinated via digital communication (Ling, 2005). Whilst there are concerns over how all of these issues can affect adults: “Young people tend to be targets for such panics that, underscored by idealized notions of childhood, relate to sexuality, the family, crime and delinquency (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999)” (Lim, 2013, 97).

For example, Nancy Jo Sales in her Vanity Fair article *‘Friends without Benefits’*, explores sexting<sup>2</sup> and digital gender production. Her work investigates the practices of teenage girls and she discovered: “...a world where boys are taught they have the right to expect everything from social submission to outright sex from their female peers” (Sales, 2015) She reports that teenagers use social media predominantly as a way to explore sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Sexting refers to the intimate exchange of messages that contain sexual content

interaction and conform to misogynistic sexual stereotypes. Sales believes that these intimate activities are pursued over any other, and responsible for issues of sexual harassment and gender inequality.

Other authors have examined sexting and attempted to discern if there are any valid concerns. Goggin (2006) developed the term 'mobile panic' to encompass the new functionalities that technological devices bring to moral panics. His work explored the fear surrounding sexting and bears some similarity to that of Ringrose and Harvey (2015) because he explores the social problems that can arise from an unauthorized sharing of these messages. As we have noted, this can include peer ostracization and detrimental emotional consequences. However, Lim (2013) notes that Goggin (2010) discovered:

An otherwise unexceptional daily practice where young people share nude or semi-nude images of themselves via their mobile phones, stoked public anxieties in Australia and prompted over-zealous legal measures being taken against youths. (Lim, 2013, 97)

The above work illustrates the extreme reactions that can be produced by authority figures when they are confronted with sensationalised reports that do not perhaps fully contextualise or explore the issue at hand. His work is part of a growing body of literature that seeks to move away from examining teenage digital practices within the context of adult driven fears, and instead explore how their actual interactions influence their social experiences. As Dannah boyd writes: "Adults are bound to project the same fears and anxieties they have about social media onto whatever new technology captures the

imagination of future youth” (2014, 211). Although these fears can be an important and necessary part of defining acceptable safety guidelines, they can often do not acknowledge how adolescents are actually using technology. This can result in studies that do not accurately represent the concerns of the teenage generation or produce biased conclusions which are driven solely by adult hypotheses. Helsper, in reference to boyd’s (2014, 2784) work, states “She wants to counter moral panics by urging adults to understand the positive and complex ways in which young people interact with technology”.

This thesis adds to the literature that provides a non-judgemental voice to the experiences of teenagers. As boyd (2014) suggests, it seeks to understand the actions and behaviour of teenagers within the context they provide, and attempts to put aside the concerns that produce the moral panics noted above. This is important because, as Lim writes:

Mobile media have insinuated their way into the lives of young people today and the implications of their adoption, whether for youth empowerment or youth deviance, are of considerable societal significance and warrant sustained academic attention of a multidisciplinary nature. (2013, 100)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored how identity is established, introduced the concept of virtual environments and digital platforms, and reviewed literature that joins these two theories together within the context of adolescence and social networking. The role of the profile

in establishing 'self' amongst the collective network, and the manner in which these presentations are governed and influenced by social pressures (alongside the affordances of new digital technologies), means that traditional methods of interaction and identity have been altered for younger generations. Their efforts in mastering these platforms, and the difficulties that these sites produce in the context of offline versus online performances, is crucial to how they might develop or grow amidst their peer network; endeavouring to fit in and create lasting and happy personal connections. This leads us to a discussion of the role of social capital in the formation of networks and groups, and later to how social networking can influence its creation.

## **Chapter Three: Social Capital, Networks and Norm Circles**

### **Introduction**

In the opening chapter of David Halpern's (2005) book *Social Capital*, we are introduced to a concept which, by the very nature of the semantics that define it, suggests a currency derived from the importance of human contact. In recent years, social capital has been the focus of much interest and debate due to work by academics like Putnam (2000), Coleman (1990) and Bourdieu (1986) and a resurgence of interest in their work. This chapter offers a brief description of social capital, examines its pertinence and use, and explores the aforementioned authors who have popularised the term. As each writer has conceptualized the idea in different (and sometimes contradictory) ways, we will examine the opposing elements of their work and evaluate their use. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of these arguments and provides a context for latter parts of this thesis, which will draw upon these ideas in the analysis of online teenage behaviour.

### **Bourdieu: Field, Habitus and Capital**

We might attempt to describe social capital as a resource which is produced through the bonding and interactive actions of individuals contained within a set network. It is a resource which facilitates (whilst also requiring) the creation of trust and cohesion amongst groups of people, and arguably contributes to a healthier and happier society. For Bourdieu it is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1980, 2). Over the course of his work, but starting with his book in 1977 titled '*An Outline of the Theory of Practice*', Bourdieu established theories

on his concepts of habitus, the four types capital (social, cultural, economic and symbolic) that are present, and the fields in which they act.

The field is the setting (or social arena) in which individuals come together to interact, produce or struggle for a number of types of capital. Depending upon how fields are structured, the most valuable form of capital will vary between economic, cultural, social and/or symbolic capital. A good example of the multitude of fields that exist within society, and the manner in which they might overlap or act autonomously, is that of the judicial system. Someone who has broken a law might be accountable to local law enforcement, which can act within its own boundaries to ensure that punishment is meted out. However, should the crime require heavier repercussions, more powerful and over-arching courts or judges can be employed to deal with these transgressions. These fields, both connected but also able to function separately, are part of larger field that is a national criminal and justice system. Another example, which does not involve sanctioned institutions, is local families within a town or neighbourhood. Each family is a unit comprising of social agents who can interact amongst themselves, but also as a group within the wider community. The community can in turn function as a group within a larger geographical setting, and so on up to a national or global level. The limits of these fields are where the effects produced from the relational positions of those involved no longer function; the squabbles of a family will be of little sway in the national field, just as the decision of a small court can be overturned by that of a higher judiciary power. According to the rules of these fields, which can be social norms or institutionalised laws and customs, people work to possess a number of benefits which are valuable to these environments. The ability to which people are able to successfully cultivate relationships



or access resources is dependant on how they can adapt to these rules. This is the foundation of Bourdieu's 'habitus'.

Habitus is defined as the dispositions that are formed through the norms and rules of a specific group, and how an agent encounters and differentiates between courses of action (Bourdieu, 1990). As we might expect, because each social group possesses its own pressures and values, an individual's habitus is unique to (and directly formed by) the experiences of that individual, whilst also simultaneously representative of the group's character and construction (Bourdieu, 1984). As the habitus is the result of a combination of personal events and group norms, it both embodies the values of that environment and guides how actions and future situations are perceived. Similar to the reflexive and unconscious nature of identity, the individual's activation and understanding of the habitus is often automatic:

It is a mode of knowledge that does not necessarily contain knowledge of its own principles ('doct ignoratia') and is constitutive of reasonable but not rational behaviour: 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know'. (McNay, 1999 citing Bourdieu, 1990, 69)

In a cyclical manner, it continually represents a groups values and guides behaviour in a manner that will likely reproduce these concepts (Bourdieu, 1998, 1977):

As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others. (Bourdieu, 1977, 95)

The use of the word 'generative' is important and key to Bourdieu because as it reveals that the habitus is not an all commanding set of rules which ensures unwavering obedience (McNay, 1999). "Within certain objective limits (the field), it engenders a potentially infinite number of patterns of behaviour, thought and expression that are both 'relatively unpredictable' but also 'limited in their diversity' (Bourdieu, 1990, 55)" (McNay, 1999, 100). The relationship between the field, or social environment, and the individual's habitus mean that it is informed in one sense by the conditions that create it, and also that it, in and of itself, creates meaning and value to the field it belongs to (Bourdieu, 1992). Thus whilst the habitus provides a series of values and experiences which might structure the individual's behaviours within a certain field, their actions might also in some cases affect these same norms, and alter the field. "[Habitus] is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (Bourdieu, 1992, 133).

However, Bourdieu stresses that habitus, due to its ties to family and social class, will often reproduce the same conditions and structures that have informed its initial production (1980, 1984). As it is our primary socialisation into the world (facilitated by family, culture and education) that informs our physical and mental development, the

environment and resources available to us at that time, will shape our expectations and understandings of the world around us (1980, 1984). Furthermore, these influences will directly impact our ability to position ourselves in amongst these environments and affect the way we are able to engage. Before exploring this key point further, we must discuss the various forms of capital that can combine and constitute habitus.

As has been noted earlier in this section, depending on the ability of the actor and the field in which they are situated, certain types of capital will be valued more highly or able to influence and affect the power of these social agents. Bourdieu primarily deals with four types of capital- economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). These can be explained respectively as the financial assets which someone possesses, the resources available to an individual through the groups that they interact with, the possession of socially valued knowledge (e.g. fashion, education) and the abstract value that is placed on actions or behaviours which can influence status or legitimacy. Bourdieu is concerned with how either set might be used in the creation of power and how each of these denotes a certain worth dependent upon the environment and structure that it is used within. In some fields, the values of social and cultural capital can depend upon the degree to which they can be converted to financial resources (Bourdieu, 1986). This has to do with the legitimization of power and dominance, a central theme throughout his work (Coradani, 2010), and the differences in value that are ascribed to various forms of capital depending upon the field the social agent is within. Economic capital refers to financial assets and tangible goods; either of which can be globally used to procure further resources and create access to not only materialistic objects, but also opportunities and non-tangible items (Bourdieu, 1986). An individual who can deploy vast

sums of money is better able to create further opportunities for financial personal gain, through meetings and business transactions, than someone who is less financially affluent. As Coradani writes:

Unlike other types of capital, which constitute certain resources supported by their respective principles of legitimation together with their specific rules which refer to a space with a greater or lesser degree of social objectification, social capital is 'irreducible'. (2010, 566)

However, despite Coradani's strong bias towards the power of economic capital, this does not mean that social capital is worthless or unable to affect or transpire into other forms:

The weight of social capital inherited from the family is felt in all sectors of the field of economic power. The successive operations of cooption that determine the selection of top executives (and, to a lesser degree, the careers of ordinary managers) are armed with criteria that are never completely reducible to academic qualifications, and still less, to what the latter are supposed to officially measure. (Bourdieu, 1989, 433)

The histories that are shared between those in power, who have formed bonds and shared resources, can arguably be used to place privileged individuals into similar roles of power or wealth and gift them opportunities that might be of benefit. It is the degree to which this is possible, within the group of individuals that has been created, which determines the value of the social versus economic capital. It is here that it is important

to stress the role that these types of capital have in informing and establishing individual habitus, as well as recreating the conditions necessary for its continued reproduction. Bourdieu gives the example of education and intelligence to illustrate this argument. For him, cultural and economic capital are intricately linked with social class and education. In his 1998 essay, *The Racism of Intelligence* he states that “university graduates are of middle-class educated parents who know from experience how the institution of education works and have the economic capital to send their children to college” (Bourdieu, 1998, 179) It is the activation of this capital by these parents, and by the graduates themselves, (who have been raised amongst certain ideas and have been able to access beneficial social and educational resources), which results in their successful negotiation of the educational process. For these middle classes, this knowledge and ability (or capital) has become cumulative over a number of years, as each generation has been able to continually draw upon and deploy these resources. For individuals from working class backgrounds, who do not share the same access, knowledge or resources, the same feat would have been much harder. Further on in his essay (1998), Bourdieu’s argues that the IQ tests used to manage application and entry to educational divisions are inherently biased towards those who are able to excel at one specific type of intelligence. He notes that these exams purport to be able to judge intelligence as a one-dimensional characteristic, despite the fact that there are many other forms of mental ability, some of which cannot be measured through written or verbal examination. However, these types of traditional test (which the middle class are able to secure knowledge of and practice) are used to ensure the continued proliferation of middle and upper-class students within academia, and to restrict access to those from lower social castes. As it is often highly placed individuals within these institutions who set the entrance criteria or influence the

economic world, many of whom are from these advantaged backgrounds, Bourdieu (1998) states that the educational system and our conception of intelligence and progress, is an example of the habitus recreating the conditions that are necessary for its continued existence within the same state (i.e. reproducing the social norms).

For Bourdieu, this example also demonstrates how economic capital is not necessarily the most valuable form of capital in all fields. The acquisition of money and wealth can symbolise important status within many groups, however key members in communities might solidify or expand their capital through the adherence to group norms and moral behaviours. A well-respected individual might have achieved such a position due to acts of good will to neighbours, or thanks to portraying an understanding of customs and culture (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus individuals might not be economically wealthy but could possess forms of capital that are more suited to the creation of power and dominance within a particular field.

On the other hand, unlike economic wealth, in some aspects social capital might have a smaller reach of power across many fields; as the potential outcomes and resources which are created through bonding are unique to those relationships which are contained within specific communities (Coradani, 2010; Schwartz, 1997). Outside of the people to whom those bonds matter, the favours and abilities that are shared, do not possess the same meaning. This means that it is unlikely that they could guarantee an exchange in the same manner that money or goods can, which makes those resources unique to those within that group. Concurrently, the production of social capital is often the result of a complex process in which widely held norms and sanctions- which are discussed further

on – affect the behaviours of individuals and channel their experiences and reactions. Social capital is specialised within its field because of the measures which contribute to produce it. However, as noted above, there are a number of social arenas where social capital might be of greater value than any currency. Further on, this chapter explores the differences between Coleman and Bourdieu's conceptions of capital. Despite their differences, one poignant similarity is that families who have a prestigious links, or inside relationships, with educational boards and teachers can often place their offspring in more advantageous positions than those without. Though economic capital might have created some of these relationships in the first place, or offered the opportunity for them to be produced, in these examples it is the subsequent relationships and social capital which has created the resource of a better education (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988).

The specific environments in which forms of capital are utilised or hold favour are important in analysis of social interactions when considering the behaviours of individuals as they communicate. Through building an understanding of how individuals attempt to manipulate their own standing within a hierarchy, through accessing either types of capital, we can begin to understand the mechanisms and motivations that underlay some social- and individual- behaviours. However, it is worth once more establishing that many of these choices are part of subconscious or undirected processes. Though we might be able to pinpoint specific occasions where social behaviours have resulted in the above allocation or exchange of resources, they are just as much a reflex as the production of identity that was covered in the previous chapter.

For Coradani, the existence of social capital implies: "the presence of relationship networks originally formed for other ends (such as kinship, friendship, educational or professional fellowship) in spaces or fields and respective institution." (2010, 566). This sum up the nature of the relationship between bonding and resources which is vital here. At any given point, an individual might belong to dozens of different fields; some requiring very different roles and behaviours to the others, or perhaps many demanding similar rules and values in order for you to be a member. "The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent ... depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize" (Bourdieu, 1986, 249). The more people with whom you socialise, the larger the pool of potential resources that you can accumulate. However, this does not mean that the same level, or quality, of resource can be produced through simply creating a large network. "It is a quality produced by the totality of the relationships between actors, rather than merely a common "quality" of the group" (Bourdieu, 1980, 2). In the same way that the capital which is produced is unique to those relationships, the process itself that forms these bonds are just as specific. Some might need only the occasional effort to maintain a strong connection, whilst others might require daily contact for the same result. These ideas can often be referred to in terms of building strong or weak interpersonal ties (Granovetter, 1978, 1983).

A good example of this concept is the scenario of people living on the same street. For those who are close to their neighbours, they might feel comfortable asking (and successfully receiving) help in looking after offspring, pets or their property; thus accessing their friend's time and assets to help them. On the other hand, these same goals are less likely to be achieved if you were to ask someone who you have only had



fleeting encounters with. Although this does not rule out that they might agree and offer you help, without any further form of relationship investment (moving that interaction from a weak to strong tie) it is unlikely that future resources could be obtained:

The group itself provides these resources, and they serve as credentials, sources of leverage, status, or worth (Bourdieu, 1986). These resources are exchanged, and as they are exchanged, they reinforce the relationships that exist in the group. Therefore, the social interactions that occur maintain and reinforce social relationships and social standing through the exchange of social capital. (Julien, 2014, 364)

Through working in accordance with, or against, the rules of the field that the individual is engaged to, a hierarchy is established that might reinforce or challenge the positions of social agents. The underlying cause of these struggles, whether they are aimed at increasing the overall cohesion of society or intent only on furthering personal gain, is the root of the divide that has formed between advocates of Bourdieu and American academics who developed parallel ideas in the pursuit of a different theoretical agenda.

### **Putnam and Coleman**

The works of Putnam and Coleman, in their exploration of social capital, have encompassed investigations into why many contemporary societies lack cohesion between communities, when compared to an older era. This can be seen in their definitions of social capital and the reasons they believe are responsible for its production. Furthermore, their explanations accord social capital a measure of positive

social power to potentially increase the level of integration and happiness between disparate groups. The similarity between Coleman and Putnam is perhaps unsurprising given that they have both collaborated on significant works concerning social capital.

Putnam views the relationship between norms, obligations and networks as the process through which resources are shared and created; just as we have noted above with Bourdieu (Putnam, 1993, 2000). His central thesis is “that if a region has a well-functioning economic system and a high level of political integration, these are the result of the region’s successful accumulation of social capital” (Siisiäinen, 2000, 2). The goods that are produced are “mutually beneficial” as their existence- and the manner in which they are formed- rely on the co-operation of those involved (Putnam, 1993, 2000):

Because individuals in a social organization work together for the common good, an important aspect of Putnam’s theory of social capital is that of reciprocity: there is an expectation that anything done by a person will be repaid in the future either by another individual or through group membership. (Julien, 2014, 359)

Likewise, Coleman’s conception of social capital as a specific resource for action (Coleman, 1988; Marsden, 2005) also credits it as motivated by working towards the public good and the creation of human capital (Coleman, 1988). However, the difference in theories arises when Coleman attributes the inclusion of an individual’s resources within the collective, to the motivating presence of norms and sanctions. Or rather, that the need to act selflessly and on behalf of others for the greater good, is one of the prevailing norms that creates social capital. For Putnam and Coleman, the drive to bond

and share with others leads to the sharing of skills and knowledge throughout a community. This in turn can enhance cohesion amongst groups and promote a sense of collective well-being, whilst also leading to opportunities to solve future complex problems that the group might encounter (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Huysman, 2004; Lin, 1999).

One of the most striking differences in the use of the concept of social capital between Bourdieu and Coleman is in the analysis of the effect it has on educational performance. For Bourdieu, the successful cultivation of personal relationships through existing networks and power formations (e.g. business partners) coupled with cultural capital, can lead to the successful manipulation of the educational system. This in turn can produce further capital and viable resources (Bourdieu, 1984). This means that by utilising ties that are linked to the educational system, which can place an individual in a better school or provide them with a higher quality of learning and opportunities, social capital can work to create and establish a hierarchy that is biased toward specific people. This contrasts Coleman's approach, which views it as a morally positive basic resource that can encourage better performance and further the overall skills present within a community (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Both theorists acknowledge that someone might prosper over another in the short term by accessing a better education, but for Coleman the overall aim is situated within the wider (and more positive) context of the wellbeing of society. "In summary, social capital may signify a resource for educational and social hierarchization or, alternatively, a pedagogical increment that contributes to school performance, human capital and social control and integration" (Coradini, 2010, 571).

The relevance of this argument, for this thesis, can be found in recent studies that have examined digital behaviours and the role of social capital. In an analysis of the role of internet memes (digitally shared cultural pictures). Julien (2014) draws on Bourdieu and his idea of establishing oneself apart from others by displaying your place in a valued group that is notably merited over others (Bourdieu, 1998):

Because digital inhabitants derive part of their total stake of social capital online, they are invested in online relations and are not 'indifferent' to making distinguishing judgments about what will indicate membership in the digital, online community. One mechanism for the expression of this membership and unique online knowledge is internet memes. Therefore, digital social capital exists online because online users are able and have a vested interest to distinguish it as such while they exist online. (Julien, 2014, 367)

Through the use of internet memes, and the ability to manipulate and deploy these messages, individuals can demonstrate that they are part of a cultural group that holds (or has access to) a specific knowledge. Often memes will feature messages that revolve around popular stories or jokes, satirising or parodying events both offline and on:

The distinguishing judgment of others is implied in the sharing of memes, and this judgment leads to differences in social existence. This in turn 'sets off the endless dialectic of distinction and pretention, recognition and misrecognition, arbitrariness and necessity', all of which are necessary parts of the hierarchy, struggle, and contention that are fundamental in social existence (Bourdieu, 2000;

Wacquant, 2008, 264). It is not civic duty or the spread of knowledge that is present in the actions of digital inhabitants, but conflict and contention. This agonistic conflict extends to the internet and the social interactions therein because the internet is a new field. (Julien, 2014, 367)

Thus, just as Bourdieu noted (in contrast to Putnam or Coleman) individuals have exploited specific capitals or resources in order to produce further social capital online through excluding others; in this case cultural capital has been the catalyst for this process. Although Julien is not the first academic to include social capital into a study on digital technology (Hooff et al, 2004; Huysman, 2004), there are precious few works that have located their arguments within the contexts of contemporary social networks or digital applications. Studies that are able to combine theories of capital alongside newer technologies, are likely to be able to answer questions as to how capital (in its many forms) is manifested online and how this influences user behaviour.

However, in order to understand the power of social values or knowledge, and how individuals experience these concepts, we must establish a critical perspective on human interaction and the mechanisms which govern it. This brings us to a discussion of norm circles and the work of Dave Elder-Vass.

### **Social Norms**

Social norms can loosely be defined as rules which decide what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour. Unlike laws or ideas which are governed by institutional bodies: “Many of these rules - if not all of them- are unwritten” (Halpern, 2005, 10) and as such they are

often shared values which are held by a collective of people. These norms can enforce behavioural traits that are quite widely acknowledged (being polite to neighbours, keeping things clean) or can be more specific acts according to the individuals; for example, looking after someone's pet whilst they are away, or lending money to a friend. Whilst this simple explanation might initially seem to suffice, when we consider the complexity and breadth of the many unique social rules which we follow (often unconsciously) we must seek to understand deeper social structures and ontologies.

For a better description of these ideas we will use the work of Dave Elder-Vass. In *The Reality of Social Construction*, he examines the theoretical issues that arise from examining social norms: "The problem of normativity is how to explain the tendency that people have to follow practices that are relatively standardised across a social group" (Elder-Vass, 2012, 22). The focus of contention is over the presence and abilities of social structures, which are often taken to be able to exert large influences over many individuals. This is in turn part of a larger argument of structure versus agency, and whether it is the collective that coerces the self, or the will of the individual that defines their actions (Berger, 1966). One of many debated points is whether these governing structures exist at all, what the level of their power is and how they might be able to exert it:

While there may be many different kinds of social structures, I argue that culture, language, discourse, and knowledge are all produced by different varieties of the same broad type of social structure. They are produced, to be more precise, by norm circles. (Elder-Vass, 2012, 15)

In order to fully comprehend social capital, it is vital to briefly examine the ontological theories that are used when defining and constructing our understanding of norm systems and structures, just as Elder-Vass does. Once an appreciation of these ideas has been achieved, we can contextualise the role that social capital plays when individuals follow localised behaviours, and also explain why they might do so.

Elder-Vass bases his work on theorists like Bhaskar, who propose that we examine the world around us using a theory of casual powers. This concept attempts to explain why the social sciences are unable to completely predict the outcome of specific situations. Bhaskar's (1978) theory states that certain outcomes are the direct result of casual powers. However, the outcome which we might focus on, as sociologists, may be the product of more than one casual power acting upon a situation and thus might be different from a similar occurrence. "Causal powers do not produce exceptionless empirical regularities. Instead, they operate as tendencies" (Elder-Vass, 2012, 16). A simple example of this is the act of opening a door to enter a home. The insertion of key into lock should allow entry through the doorway, and we would argue that this should happen without fail. However, changes in temperature might swell the surrounding wood, preventing it from moving. Changes to the metals in the key might not allow it to unlock the door, or force it to snap under the pressure that is applied to it. Thus although we might position the person in the same way every time, and provide them with the same door and key, there are other powers which might affect the end result. For critical realists, of which Bhaskar and Elder-Vass both are, the role of the social sciences is to identify these mechanisms and the factors that influence them:

The laws discovered by experiments are 'tendencies' of the underlying mechanisms, which may or may not issue in regular and observable event sequences when the mechanism is interacting with other mechanisms outside the artificial experimental situation. (Benton & Craib, 2001, 125)

In the context of localised behaviours, the manner in which people might adhere to polite phrases when interacting with one another is not only a voluntary choice, but also the outcome of a mechanism which has established that it is socially acceptable to conduct yourself in that way: "Empirical regularities in themselves...are not causes but effects and so, if social institutions are to play a causal role, they must be something more than such regularities" (Elder-Vass, 2010, 117).

To adequately explore social behaviours and the casual powers that govern them using this ontology, we must be able to focus upon singular casual powers and the processes that create them. This is titled 'retroduction' (Lawson, 1997). Furthermore we need to isolate a singular event and analyse the many levels of causality which contributed to producing that effect; this is called by retrodiction by Lawson:

This combination of retroduction and retrodiction that follows from a causal powers ontology is the kind of framework, I believe, that enables us to combine a theoretical understanding of consistent causal mechanisms with an appreciation of the sheer complexity of the actual world and "the enormous demands of subtlety that this imposes upon anyone wanting to come anywhere near an



apprehension of it in a given time and place” (Stones, 1996, 1). (Elder-Vass, 2012, 18)

Or, as Halpern writes:

We should be attentive to these different levels of analysis and ready to distinguish between them. In this sense, we need to have our conceptual cake and eat it. We need to make the conceptual distinction between these levels, layers or ‘species’ of networks in society, yet also need to recognise that in some important sense they are part of the same ‘sociological genus’. (Halpern, 2005, 19)

Through the use of these theoretical tools we are able to focus on specific social activities and situate them within a wider understanding of the factors that contribute to create them.

This leads us to the nature of the norm circles that Elder-Vass discusses; how they are perceived, enforced and constructed. To use the previous example of the common phrases ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, are these utilised because the individual believes that they should be, or because the wider collective deems that they are an appropriate part of social life? Furthermore, do we use such words because we agree with the concept that they are beneficial or because we do not wish to contravene such widely upheld principles and thus potentially damage our own standing? How are these norms governed and interpreted? Elder-Vass draws upon Durkheim in his response to the following effect:

The public conscience exercises a check on every act which offends it by means of the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of citizens, and the appropriate penalties at its disposal.... If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effect as a punishment in the strict sense of the word.

(Durkheim, 1964, 2–3)

If we examine this it would suggest that the fear of negative reciprocity is the driving force behind the common adherence to social norms, and that the worry over reprisal is based upon society as a whole. However Elder-Vass writes that is a location specific ontology which can be held at the forefront of individual's minds, as opposed to believing that absolutely everyone (even those you are not linked with) will react in the same manner to a breach of social etiquette (Elder-Vass, 2012). This allows us to conceptualise norm circles in the same way that identities have been discussed in the previous chapter; some overlapping with others, whilst some remaining very specific to certain groups. Though in this case we must be aware that as identities and social norms might be chosen to suit varying needs or circumstance, unlike alternate identities, many can pick to follow or flout the same norm. Therefore, part of our understanding of these circles is that they are relative to the people we consider around us who might value them. "In other words, in addition to the proximal norm circle, each of us may also have an imagined norm circle for each norm – that set of people whom the central individual believes would endorse or enforce the norm" (Elder-Vass, 2012, 25). Elder-Vass use of 'imagined' is central to this point as it represents those individuals or groups we only think might notice, or take

offence, at our actions should they not accord with the general consensus. The power and influence of social norms is therefore not only comprised of the action that is likely to be taken if they are breached, but the perceived level of action which we attach to those ideas.

Those who are concerned with the upholding of these values are considered by Elder-Vass to define the “actual norm circle”:

In the case of proximal and imagined norm circles, there is potentially a circle with a different extent for each individual who holds the norm concerned, but there will only be one actual norm circle for each norm, which includes all the (probably overlapping) proximal norm circles of all those individuals who hold the norm.  
(Elder-Vass, 2012, 25)

This means that although some might value that behaviour to a different degree, and we might experience more or less personal consideration of them due to our thoughts or the thoughts of those around us, there is in fact a singular actual norm level that exists which encompasses those within the group; a base level.

The relationship between the imagined, proximal and actual norm circle create the adherence to the group’s values. We incorporate the norms we witness, or are taught, and pursue them because we worry about what those around us might think of us, should we choose otherwise. When and how we decide our behaviour in relation to these norms, is based around when we think we might be observed, or when our actions might

be relevant to that norm or group. Whilst the outcome of following, or disregarding, those behaviours is the result of the actual norm value that is in effect (Elder-Vass, 2012).

Importantly, there is always the possibility for error on behalf of the individual's understanding of these three interlinked processes. Perceived discrepancies between these types of circles can result in negative outcomes. For example, when entering an individual's house which you have never visited before, you are unaware of the specific house rules which are in effect. If a guest enters without removing their shoes, and the owner is particular on footwear remaining at the door, a socially awkward situation might occur. In this case, the guest (who is likely aware of this rule in common society) may have thought that the owner did not value this behaviour. If they are incorrect then they have flouted the norm and could be held accountable for this.

This theory of norm circles attributes the casual power to the group, rather than the individual, in coercing members to act accordingly:

Members of a norm circle are aware that other members of the circle share their commitment, they feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned, and they have an expectation of others that they will support them in that endorsement and enforcement. (Elder-Vass, 2012, 26)

Through pursuing the socially accepted methods of behaviour, members strengthen their bonds between others and reinforce the values of the group; as ideas which are felt to be supported by many often hold a higher significance over ideas kept by only a few. "What

norm circles produce in individuals is a set of beliefs or dispositions regarding appropriate behaviour; the influence of the norm circle, we may say, is mediated through these beliefs or dispositions” (Elder-Vass, 2012, 27). However, in accordance with a critical realist perspective, Elder-Vass contends that this does not mean that individuals are bound to follow these ideas. Instead they produce the tendencies that were mentioned earlier.

These concepts allow us to examine and identify, how and why individuals choose to adopt a standardised behaviour. This is key in social capital discussions as the production of resources through relationships is often built from a common ground that is based on sharing similar beliefs and actions. Through engaging in accepted patterns of social interaction, members of a group can create trust and bonds between one another that might ultimately lead to them accessing previously unobtainable items or opportunities. The value of using Elder-Vass in this literature review is that his construction of the types of norm circles takes into account the unknown and regional nature of the social rules which are under focus. This links in closely with Bourdieu’s ideas about the unique importance of social capital:

As social capital is not legitimate as such, relative to a certain field, its importance increases insofar as the ‘connections’ are more numerous and intense, but also more hidden. Much of its efficacy stems from the fact that these remain ‘unknown or even clandestine’, such as in the case of relatively distant family relations. (Coradani, 2010, 568)

This also acknowledges that just as the norms that coerce or inform behaviour might be 'hidden', the sanctions which enforce them can likewise operate in similar manners. Although negative reprisals might take the form of open punishments (e.g. fines or legal recourse) "more commonly, however, the sanction is indirect and subtle, such as through gossip and reputation" (Halpern, 2005, 11). Often this can be just as effective, if not more so, as a damaged public reputation can make future production of social capital very difficult in specific regions.

On the other hand, it is worth acknowledging that acquiescence to norms is not perhaps always motivated by negative sanctions. Many social rules, like the use of polite phrases or the complex balance of gift giving and receiving, can accrue positive standing to those involved (Elder-Vass, 2015). Thus actions can not only be fuelled out of fear for breaking group etiquette, but also by a perceived gain should they successfully follow specific values. Both theorists acknowledge that the choice to follow a set behaviour might not be motivated by an altruistic desire to conform within wider society. On the contrary, despite internally disagreeing with the prevailing norm, an individual might still choose to acquiesce because they are aware that doing so will again potentially increase their personal social standing. Or they might simply be aware that to disagree or not conform might create complications for them with that group. The act of pursuing group norms is therefore far more intricate than a knee jerk reaction that stems from the fear of becoming a social pariah; it can both elevate and diminish social standing, and the knowledge of either outcome is key in personal decisions. These understandings of social ramifications are vital to how an individual chooses to express their behaviour and ideas.

## **Conclusion**

The literature demonstrates a clear academic divide over the structuring purpose behind social capital. For American Communitarianists, broad and varied social relationships can increase the levels of trust, cohesion and accessible resources or skills which are available within a community. Each individual works to bring their best to the group and act on behalf of the moral good, prompted by the norms that govern those regions general behaviours. We might argue that this approach, written about by Putnam and Coleman, is inclusive in its use. However, Bourdieu questions the personal motivations that might lead to social interactions and notes that in many cases, social capital is built at the expense of others. Skills and resources are not so much as shared, as controlled in a manner that might benefit a specific hierarchy; or work in an exclusionary way (Bourdieu, 1998). The debate could be summarised as an argument between those who see social capital as a force that works to promote a happier, and more connected society versus those who perceive it to be a method of power domination through the advantageous use of social interactions.

This brings us to the final element of the literature review which concerns the construction of gender. Not only is this a popular and contested area of study within the social sciences, but it can also be argued to direct many of the norms and sanctions that contribute to the ideas of social capital which have been detailed here.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This thesis uses data that was collected within a town in Leicestershire, England, over the course of two years. The study uses data recorded during 8 semi-structured interviews and 9 focus groups, involving 98 participants in total; of whom 20 were girls and 78 were boys. To complement qualitative methods, a quantitative survey was also used to explore statistical trends amongst the sample group. The three schools that participated are St Martin's Catholic Primary School, Lester Grammar for Boys and Rougard Academy.

This chapter outlines the methods which were used in this project. It begins with an examination of the methodological orientation. This is followed by a look at the role of reflexivity within this thesis. After this there is a definition of the quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and focus groups) research methods that were used when conducting the investigation and why these techniques were suitable. This is partnered with a description of the analytical style used to produce the conclusions found in the following chapters. To add to the work already covered on reflexivity, there is then a section which exploring factors that are likely to have affected elements of the research process, analysis and overall interpretation. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look at the ethical considerations that were required when conducting a project with under 18's and a discussion on how methods should be adapted for this age range.



## **Methodological Orientation**

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between adolescents and social networking, and the manner in which these digital technologies influenced the construction of identity, gender and social bonds. As this project seeks to understand the subjective experiences of adolescents it will follow the interpretivist tradition. The justification for this is that interpretivism tends to explore “the social and culturally embedded nature of individual experiences” (Saks, 2007, 25).

Following on from Weber’s (1978) school of Verstehen<sup>3</sup> sociology, Alfred Schutz (1970) posited that scientific investigation, which explored social life, must be based “on the meanings and knowledge of the studied actors” (Goldkuhl, 2012, 4). This is a shift from the work of positivists, who believe that social experimentation should be conducted through the rigorous testing of hypothesis. Positivists believe that we will ascertain more valid social knowledge through testing actions and social mechanisms, analysing the results and seeing if outcomes can be reproduced or located across a broad spectrum (Seale, 2004). However interpretivists place value in the reported experiences and subjective accounts of individuals. It is a:

Shift in focus from a position where the researcher seeks to observe patterns in group behaviour to a position that seeks to understand individual’s experiences of

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<sup>3</sup> “Verstehen is a German term that means to understand, perceive, know, and comprehend the nature and significance of a phenomenon. To grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by another. Weber used the term to refer to the social scientist's attempt to understand both the intention and the context of human action.” (Elwell, 1996)

interactions, events and social processes and identity patterns in these subjective experiences. (Saks, 2007, 25)

At the core of interpretivism is the idea of working with meanings that are already present in the world. The researcher must use these social meanings and realities, without altering them, as steps in the process of forming conclusions about their role in human behaviour (Goldkuhl, 2012). This contrasts against the positivist's tendency to impose their own external logic on the data they receive (Silverman, 1970).vThrough placing value on the subjective interpretations and actions of individuals within the world, interpretivists are depending upon social constructivism. This is the argument that "we have no warrant for believing in reality because we have access only to our own beliefs about it, glossed as "knowledge", and not to reality itself" (Elder-Vass, 2012, 12).

Here Elder-Vass states that this interpretation operates on the understanding that the social actions and meanings which are present in the world are derived solely human cognition. He states that the social realities we witness are the product of human efforts engaged in social relations and organization. This is why Schutz (1970) claims that scientific research which explores human behaviour is "of second order-character" (Goldkuhl, 2012, 4). Whilst there is a world that operates regardless of human input, and operates regardless of what is thought about it, the social realities present within society are the result of collective human construction:

If knowledge, then, is socially constructed, and reality is only accessible to us in the form of our beliefs about it, then there is nothing we can think or say that is

not socially constructed. The implication of this view is that everything is a social construction...that we can never escape from in order to actually obtain epistemic access to that world. (Elder-Vass, 2012, 12)

Importantly, critical realists argue that we are ultimately unable to have a definitive grasp of what occurs in the world. “All theories about the world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and worldview, and all knowledge is partial, incomplete, and fallible” (Maxwell, 2012, 5). The world is regarded as ‘the way it is’, with many alternate – but not specifically valid or invalid- versions of what takes place. Critical realists posit that there are underlying mechanisms that often influence human life, without our conscious input, but which we are unable to fully comprehend objectively. How then are we meant to study the social world around us, if we are never able to escape our own entanglements in the construction of reality? Yet despite the differences between realism and social constructivism, it is possible to reconcile these views; indeed there is arguably an element of critical realism within an interpretivist ideology.

Elder-Vass, at the start of his book *The Reality of Social Construction*, highlights many authors who have done just this (Smith, 2010; Sayer, 2000; Coole and Frost, 2010); including the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who we have encountered in discussion of social capital. He includes Sewell, who argues that:

Nonhuman resources have a material existence that is not reducible to rules or schemas, but the activation of material things as resources, the determination of

their value and social power, is dependent on the cultural schemas that inform their social use. (1992, 12)

Much of the work that is conducted in this thesis draws upon Elder-Vass's exploration of "the mechanisms, the social entities, and the processes that lie behind social construction" (Elder-Vass, 2012, 14) alongside his theories of norm circles. These theoretical tools allow the author to situate the experiences of participants within their social world and identify interlinked factors that influence their behaviours and perceptions. This is the value of the blending of realism and social constructivism.

Therefore, in a methodological context, investigations must incorporate opportunities where participants and their experiences guide exploration, and are valued, whilst also aiming to reduce the influence of the researcher. Interpretivists are therefore more likely to use an approach where, "rather than merely testing pre-existing ideas, they can make observations that demand the creation of new ideas and categories that might not emerge in quantitative designs" (Saks, 2007; Ezzy, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This requires techniques that allow respondents the freedom to introduce their own beliefs and justify experiences, as the researcher attempts to maintain a flexible mindset throughout the research process. Whilst a positivist approach will tend to only explore ideas that relate to a specific focus, the interpretivist uncovers the intricate nature of social processes as they emerge and are contextualised by individuals. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Saks, 2007). This can mean that as research unfolds and responses are gathered, topics can deviate and even challenge ideas that might have been present

before. If the interpretivist is truly motivated to explore the social world as they find it, then they must adapt to these changes.

Through using focus groups and interviews, or methods which provide a voice to the respondents, social investigation can “create a holistic understanding of the studied area; not only an understanding of its different parts” (Goldkuhl, 2012, 6). Projects can thus represent the rich and varied nature of social interaction, acknowledging conflict, tension and struggle (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) whilst valuing “subjective experience in such a way as to reflect on consistencies and parallels, while retaining the various nuances of the data” (Saks, 2007, 26). Ultimately this approach can provide sociologists with opportunities to witness the social world as it is believed to be.

However, as with most methodologies there are disadvantages. Though interpretivists are prone to using interviews or focus groups, there is little in the way of a standardised approach to using these methods (Bryman, 2001). This of course relates to the fact that many social explorations are investigations into unique aspects of life, and so will require distinct ways to research or analyse them. Whilst this freedom is great in terms of encouraging a free thinking mindset to social evaluation, it does mean that there is always the danger of pursuing topics in a less focused manner than surveys or questionnaires might provide (Bryman, 2001). In this chapter, the author notes the challenges that were faced in creating a specific set of methods that would both engage adolescents and ensure the collection of significant data.

Added to this drawback is the tendency for some researchers to generalize trends discovered within a small selection of interviews. This can lead to tenuous justifications for stated patterns that, in reality, have only been noted amongst a small sample of the overall population (Bell, 2002; Seale, 1999; Oakley, 1989). This can prompt researchers to use a mixed methods approach which might counteract these issues. From a theoretical standpoint, the advantage of combining quantitative and qualitative methods is that patterns revealed within surveys and questionnaires can be used to contextualise conclusions found within interview sessions. Statistics from these methods can be used to ascertain how generalised individual comments are, and ascertain what their relationship is to the wider sample population (Kitzinger, 1994, Spicer, 2004). Conversely, trends discovered in quantitative responses can then be questioned during qualitative sessions and evaluated by participants (McLafferty, 1995). The value of using a mixed methods technique is explored later in this chapter.

Finally, a key criticism of interpretivism and qualitative methods is that the interpretation of data is based very much on the reflections of the researcher. Schutz states that the social scientist should look “at [the observed situation] with the same detached equanimity with which the natural scientist looks at the occurrences in his laboratory” (Schutz, 1970, 275). However more contemporary interest in the value of reflexivity has countered that the investigator can never truly “assume a value-neutral stance” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). In the analytical stages of a process, as a researcher attempts to uncover trends and patterns, it is their decisions which choose how valuable responses are. Whilst some social scientists might attempt to be totally objective, it is

likely that external factors or experiences will always influence interpretive choices. This brings us to a brief examination of reflexivity.

### **The Role of Reflexivity**

Reflexivity...has come to mean thinking carefully about who has done the research and how, under what conditions, how it was written, by whom, and what impact these might have on the value of the ethnography produced. (O'Reilly, 2012)

Being reflexive means acknowledging and understanding factors which might have influenced the researcher, knowingly or unknowingly, during the investigative process. This means understanding that objectivity within social exploration is difficult to obtain and that all aspects of research are likely to have been affected by factors that not always initially apparent or understood. This can include, but is by no means limited to, conscious and unconscious methodological choices, analytical interpretations and personal characteristics of the researcher (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Hobbs and May, 1993). Through critiquing the researcher's decisions or motivations, conclusions and theories can be evaluated and contextualised.

The rise of the reflexive turn within social research is, in part, prompted by the work of feminist authors (Salzman, 2002; Marcus 1998), as they sought to both understand the nature of how we study the social world (and construct our interpretation) and challenge androcentricity within ethnography (O'Reilly, 2012). Epistemological arguments are linked to the literature noted above, where academics sought to define reality and social construction; identifying the latter as something which is inherently subjective in its

production and thus liable to bias from both researcher and 'researched' (O'Reilly, 2012). This in turn led to the challenging of many social examinations that had often previously been conducted by male academics (Marcus and James, 1986). Reflexivity argues that the experiences of the authors, and their dispositions, will always cloud the interpretations and examinations that are produced. This will ultimately always lead to some form of bias and influence the conclusions that can be drawn (Devine and Health, 1999). If we do not accept these issues, then this can lead to oversights in sociological examination, which if unchecked, can undermine the validity of the research itself (Giddens, 1976). It is these issues which were believed to be present in studies conducted predominantly by male academics, where unequal power relations had affected the study:

There was a tendency to portray the people being studied as somewhat exotic, backward or quaint. They [feminists and reflexive ethnographers] studied the way ethnographies were written and noted how clever rhetorical devices were used to persuade the reader and that the ethnographies could indeed be seen as fiction rather than fact. (O'Reilly, 2016)

Before the rise of the reflexive turn, many social explorations did not consider the impact that the author's perspectives would have upon their interpretation. Instead it was believed that because these academics conducted social examination, and possessed knowledge and academic training, that their studies were eminently valid (Marcus and James, 1986; Sholte, 1999). For Giddens, it is impossible for the social scientist to make scientific statements based from 'sensory observations' in a theoretically neutral manner because of the researcher's relationship to the social world (Giddens 1976, 135). To



ignore these factors would be to ignore the role that society has on sociological investigations themselves. This would treat sociological study as an entity which is situated outside of society and unaffected by the very thing it seeks to understand (Giddens, 1976).

Changing this mindset, and highlighting how social interpretations are intimately linked with personal experience, is the underlying theme of reflexivity (Wright Mills, 2002). This is accomplished by situating the researcher and their study within the context of society. Put simply, it means attempting to identify elements of the researcher's experiences which are likely to impact their work at any stage of social examination. This can include seeking to understand how gender might play a role in interviews of the same or different sex (Moran-Ellis, 1995), or how age might hinder or aid specific research objectives (Spyrou, 2011).

However, despite the benefits of utilising reflexivity, May argues that it "has the potential to translate into sociological sterility" (May, 1999, 3.9). He states that a dissection of the researcher's impact can go 'too far' (May, 1999, 1998). This can limit the ability of social examination because it suggests that the sociologist is never truly able to conquer pre-suppositions and explore the social world objectively (May, 1998). Similarly Adkins warns that the adoption of reflexivity can encourage a "hierarchy of speaking positions" (Adkins, 2002, 345) where the authority of the investigative narrative is once again given to the researcher. The author's experiences and thoughts have the potential to become the important elements in social research, as the author seeks to be reflexive, rather than those which are studied (Skeggs, 2004; Lumsden, 2009).

Therefore, a fine line must be walked between being aware of the situated context of the research and researcher, and not over shadowing the accounts of participants or diminishing the importance of their responses. In the closing sections of this chapter, I will evaluate how my own experiences and dispositions shaped elements of the research. This includes identifying the impact that personal characteristics, like age and gender, are likely to have influenced the dialogue between researcher and participant.

### **Access**

Access to participants who are under the age of 18 is problematic because of concerns that relate to both their age or capacity, and their inclusion within probing research (Backe-Hansen, 2002; Cameron, 2005; Punch, 2002). (The ethical considerations related to this age are covered later in this chapter, alongside decisions that were made concerning specific 'under-18' friendly methods). The most logical first step in selecting participants was to approach environments where children could be interviewed, local educational institutions. Initially this project had intended to discuss digital activities with children in the last year of primary school and follow their experiences as they moved into secondary education. This meant approaching a number of these schools in the local area. However after attempting contact through less intrusive methods (e.g. emails) and finding that communication was often lost amidst the large range of correspondence the schools receive, I used more direct methods to engage with key figures in the school. This entailed a personal approach where introductions could be made personally. Once meetings had been scheduled there were a series of talks with teachers, deputy heads and governors; each with a mixed degree of success. Those in charge of the school were

often interested in taking part, citing the merits of such a study, and sought to allow swift access to their children; helping with distributing pre-produced letters of consent and information.

Issues arose when parents were contacted and allowed to respond via the school. Some believed that the study was actively encouraging children to create Facebook accounts, or promoting the use of underage social networking. The role that social networking plays in the development of children and teens, and its influence on social delinquency, is a point of contention for many guardians, schools and academics. Fears about the negative influence it can have on young users were a feature that I encountered at all stages of the project, but were especially problematic when starting to gather data.

I was required to respond to a number of emails that blamed me for attempting to harm or subvert their child's upbringing. In one school, the subsequent outcry from a group of parents led to the school withdrawing from the study. Private interactions with guardians revealed that worries often stemmed from a fear of being judged about activities that concerned home life. These miss-conceptions about the study prompted me to adapt my strategy. Letters were subsequently sent out to parents, in later schools, which clearly stated that no Facebook account was needed or required for children to take part. Other forms were also incorporated that allowed parents to request meetings where concerns could be addressed. Following these changes there was a marked difference in how parents reacted and a better response was received.

When trying to include participants who were under the age of 11 it was also common to encounter a reluctance to allow children to discuss these topics with an adult because they might find social investigation stressful. As very few responses were received, the age range was raised and primary schools were not included any further. Instead of exploring the transition to secondary education, the focus was moved to high schools. As most institutions have at least five year groupings, they provide an opportunity to collect data from individuals who share the same geographic and educational location, but differ in terms of age, peer group and cultural background. Forearmed with knowledge of the potential problems that had been encountered in the primary schools, a number of further revisions were made before teachers in the secondary schools were introduced to the study.

### **Sampling**

In light of the access problems which were encountered when approaching most schools (secondary as well as primary), it might have seemed prudent to sample from those over 18. As individuals above this age are not deemed vulnerable, it would have been significantly easier to gain consent. The justification not to do this, supported by the literature section, was that the formative years of 11-16 are when adolescents undergo an important transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of development, identity creation and social understanding.

This study used purposive sampling (Coyne, 1997; Patton, 1990). The choice to stick with the desired age fits in line with the definition of this technique “where participants are selected on the basis of having a significant relation to the research topic” (Tonkiss, 2004,

199). In this case the 'relation' is between social networking and adolescent development. Or as Tonkiss puts it, "the design of the groups is already based on a number of assumptions about how those attitudes might be shaped" (2004, 199) Other than this criterion, and the fact that schools were the most likely environment in which to be able to contact a large number of teenagers, there were very few criteria that were placed upon the selection of individuals. Once participants had been interviewed, and their details had been collected and analysed, they were classified by age, gender or peer/year group.

In addition to the school focused research, I also used local relationships I had established to facilitate interviews that took place within family homes. These usually transpired out of every day conversations (e.g. discussions in supermarkets and within local community centres) where guardians ventured an interest in having their children take part. Once an interview had taken place with one set of children, and they had found the experience positive, some of these parents were keen to suggest others they knew who might also take part. This is a classic example of snowball sampling (Byrne, 2004; Hyman et al, 1954). This form of data collection can be very useful in gaining further contacts or participants, but it also has a number of drawbacks. As those who are suggested are likely known, by relation or friendship, to the initiator, then they are also commonly part of the same social community (Bloch, 2004). Depending on the factors that combine to make that community (e.g. class, religion, social capital) it is possible that the researcher will encounter repeated themes that might not reflect a wider group (Hyman et al, 1954). Whilst this is "helpful to get a sense of networks or the ways in which people in similar situations use the same discursive repertoires" (Bloch, 2004, 177), it does not allow for a

broader examination of widespread cultural and social practices. On its own then, this method would have provided me with a fairly limited sample group from which to base their conclusions upon. However the combination of these two approaches, and the diverse range of intakes found within each of the schools, means that there are many individuals from a broad set of backgrounds. Children were included who identified as being from Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, working and middle class families.

### **The Value of Using Mixed Methods**

The purpose of combining surveys with qualitative interviews and focus groups was to assess and verify the significance of trends which were revealed during the research session. This system has been categorised as the 'triangulation of methods' (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). The main aim of mixing methods from both quantitative and qualitative aspects is to crosscheck the conclusions that are gathered and attempt to prevent any bias provided by a single research method (Spicer, 2004). This chapter has already highlighted how data from surveys was used to guide some qualitative sessions and explore inconsistencies between responses given verbally and on paper. Disparities between interviews and surveys prompted new avenues of exploration in order to understand why adolescents reported to using only one or two SNS, but also completed answers which showed attachment to many more platforms. This meant that the quantitative aspect of the study ended up aiding the qualitative side by contextualising how adolescents connected via many social networking sites. Furthermore, during the initial research stage, interviews with participants helped in refining questions which were later used in the final surveys.

For example the questions surrounding conflict, or phrases associated with digital interaction, were derived from frequent themes found in pilot interviews. This exploration of conflict between peers ultimately led to investigating the digital role of gender and identity performance. Both of which were influential factors in the production of social tension. Finally, when analysing all the data, the combination of these methods clarified wider trends within the sample population and demonstrated links between responses that individuals had given. This led to conclusions as to why newer social networks were gaining popularity over pre-established platforms and identified reasons for this 'transition'.

It was my aim not to use mixed methods as an attempt to establish a widespread account of definitive adolescent practices. Instead I aimed to limit the degree of imposed subjectivity and personal interpretative influence (as much as is arguably possible) and allow participant's responses to focus conclusions. Similarly, statistics from surveys were not used in order to cast generalizations about an entire generation, but instead accompany insights into practices which can indicate potential contemporary behaviours within a sample group. Thus rather than producing a "definitive account of the 'truth'" (Spicer, 2004), this study and these methods aimed to provide a snapshot of the relationship between teenagers and social networking.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

The ten qualitative interviews within this study enabled participants to interact with the researcher on a personal basis. These sessions explored subjective accounts of social networking practices, where the responses received were used to guide sessions as they

progressed. Individuals were prompted to report their online behaviours, and justify and contextualise them using their own experiences. Early interviews in pilot testing provided the foundation of many of the topics that would be later explored in the main research phase. As these sessions were only between myself and one adolescent, they offered a great opportunity to test out specific questions. When individuals responded positively to a topic, or repeated themes that were noted over the course of initial interviews, then these were highlighted as key elements to be explored during the main research. These sessions also boosted my confidence as I practiced interviewing and negotiating the fine line between asking leading questions and prompting responses.

### **Focus Groups**

Using focus groups can negate some of the issues that come with speaking personally to participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Merton, 1987). Within this study there were seven focus groups, which included single and mixed gender participants. Whilst interviews are mostly between one individual, focus groups can pose questions to a larger selection of people and allow for debates to take place (Tonkiss, 2004). This means that I was able to witness many different responses from within a sample population and view how answers are justified or contested (Merton, 1987; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). During some discussions, the presence of many individuals created heated interactions where I was able to witness specific interactional behaviours during discussions (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

However, despite the possibilities that focus groups can create in terms of data, the presence of so many different people can create a number of issues (Tonkiss, 2004). As focus groups rely on inter personal dynamics and the exchanging of views, it can



sometimes create tensions between outspoken characters and others who are reticent to respond (Krueger and Casey, 2000). This was an issue which I encountered during a number of initial focus groups involving all male members, where more popular individuals would speak over less vocal peers. If these boys had been allowed to continue to over ride responses from others, it could have introduced an unhealthy bias within that group. As focus groups aim to explore the opinions of everyone involved, this was something I was keen to avoid and led me to ensuring that everyone who wished to speak was given a fair opportunity to do so.

Focus groups were normally structured according to school 'forms' (i.e. a year 7 group would contain boys aged 12-13) and thus consisted of close knit groups of individuals who spent many hours of the day together. This meant that there were a mix of very vocal characters, and others who likely felt unable to speak out. In these initial sessions it was challenging for me to draw out responses from the less confident members of the class, and provide them with a space in which they felt able to respond (this is noted further on the second reflexive section).

Furthermore, whilst the interviews had produced a brief topic outline which added an element of comparative structure between sessions, the presence of many male individuals could disrupt efforts to adhere to this (Tonkiss, 2004). In some of early focus groups, there were occasions where I had to juggle between exerting an authority which allowed individuals to heard, but might quell responses, and guiding the sessions in order to produce relevant discussions (Tonkiss, 2004). This is an incredibly challenging skill, and one which I only improved through considerable time and effort.

The topic list was produced from an early analysis of frequently occurring themes within interviews. This was used to loosely structure both personal interviews and focus groups and can be viewed in the appendix. The role of this list was to provide consistency between interviews, as there can be a tendency for sessions to follow new tangents as they are suggested by participants. As key topics had already been established, this list aided the researcher in ensuring that discussions were focused around these core concepts. This limited, or alerted the researcher to, deviation from these ideas. However, in keeping with the flexible approach encouraged by interpretivism, this topic list was suitable for revision should sessions encounter new themes that appeared relevant to previous ideas.

In both interviews and focus groups, discussions would be initiated by posing open ended questions which asked participants to talk about their Facebook experiences. This often led to an exploration of key factors that adolescents found annoying, both about the site and the behaviour of their peers online. During the rest of the session, other social networking sites would be covered –or deliberately focused on when they were included by the participants themselves- as well as topics that highlighted gendered beliefs or norms. Although the topic list contained many detailed questions on all of these areas, it was my aim to avoid prompting as much as possible. Instead I encouraged participants to confidently express their experiences in the hope that this would reveal insightful and intimate data.

These qualitative methods provided information on the subjective experiences of respondents and were effective at establishing why certain behaviours or practices were evident amongst these groups. However, it was also clear that these methods alone would not always help in discovering wider trends within peer groups.

### **Surveys**

An original survey was created by the researcher, based on the previously identified themes, and distributed at the beginning of each session. Questions included in the survey (located in the appendix) asked about individuals favourite social networking sites, the time they spent on these platforms and how they would rank them in terms of methods of contact. Early stage interviews that had noted the importance of social tension in a digital context resulted in the deliberate inclusion of a question that asked teenagers how often they witnessed conflict online. Conflict amongst users was a theme that had occurred frequently in the early testing phases and alluded to any situations where individuals had experienced tension or fights. The wording in the survey question was deliberately ambiguous and usually caused many individuals to request further information before answering. Normally this section of the survey prompted a reflection on social networking habits and if they, or others, behaved in a manner that had incited social issues. This was something which could be examined later on in the sessions, when the groups or individuals were more comfortable with both the study and the researcher. Once the surveys were completed, they were collected by the researcher and the data was input into a statistical program (SPSS) after each session.

## **Recording of Interviews and Focus Groups**

All sessions were both taped and videoed, which was authorised by guardians and school authorities. In larger groups the presence of a camera could initially be a disturbance as teenagers caught sight of themselves on video. However once the sessions had begun in earnest it was often soon forgotten. The use of video recordings was helpful when needing to examine body language and group behaviours when a number of controversial topics were discussed. After conducting qualitative interviews, those which were short (with a length of between 20-30 minutes) were transcribed into a word document. Focus groups, or interviews which were longer in length, were summarised into separate word pages. Due to the length of recorded interviews and focus groups, transcribing each set would have added further time to an already slow process. However the use of 'summary' documents which could lead to more detailed analysis (see below), meant that any extracts could be located quickly when needed. Through notating each interview, I was able to approximate where desired exchanges would be in the recording and locate them. Although this technique is not part of traditional social research, which often features lengthy transcription and textual interpretation, more recent works are key to point out the value of maintaining data in its 'raw' format. Markle et al, write that:

Instead of accepting transcription as the de facto technique for interpretive research, we suggest continually evaluating the technological landscape and considering the emerging possibilities present for improving our research designs...Working with data in its original multimedia (audio or video) state, instead of transcription, can allow for greater trustworthiness and accuracy, as well as thicker descriptions and more informative reporting. (2011)

## **Analysis - Iterative-Inductivism and Thematic Analysis**

Separating interviews and focus groups into themes helped to continually refine the projects conclusions in line with the methodological traditions that this studied adhered to. One of the many challenges that were faced during an analysis of the research was the need to maintain a flexible approach, which would explore new data whilst also remaining focused on topics which had been frequently identified as important. This required the use an iterative-inductive approach introduced by Karen O'Reilly in her book *Ethnographic Methods* (2005). O'Reilly defines this as:

Research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods...that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part/object part subject. (2005, 3)

This definition considers social research and analysis as phases which are inextricably linked together, often without clearly defined periods of exploration, analysis or writing (Crang and Cook, 2007). The above description of how I processed each session after it had been conducted, and used this to structure subsequent interviews, fits in will with these ideas. Using this approach is about attempting to marry deductive reasoning, where a hypothesis is generated from results, with inductive reasoning. The latter following the reflexive aims of trying to approach exploration with an open mind, reading relevant literature and allowing theories to be generated from the results produced as they occur.

Hammersley and Atkinson argue that the design of research and its execution is “a reflexive process that operate throughout every stage of a project” (2007, 21). Likewise

O'Reilly's definition of iterative-inductivism demonstrates that she views ethnography and reflexivity as sharing common ground:

Most ethnographers now accept that it is in fact impossible to start out with no preconceived ideas...the best to be inductive is to be open about one's preconceptions...consider what theories have already been formed on a given topic, and then to proceed in a manner which is informed but open to surprises.  
(O'Reilly, 2007, 30)

In the previous section it was stated that I would playback audio and visual recordings after each session, copying down any phrases or exchanges that were linked to the core topics, and writing the appropriate data into specific documents. This technique, labelled as thematic analysis, was an effective fit within the iterative-inductive framework (Seale, 2004; Byrne, 2004).

As there were a number of key areas –each separately exploring concepts of identity, gender, technological progression, social influence etc.- this method required many separate documents. It also necessitated multiple reviews of the same interview to ensure that all aspects had been covered fairly. This was time consuming but did result in a very detailed analysis of responses from all individuals which could later be easily recalled.

However there were also a number of topics which had shared features. For example, some facets of gender would be crucially linked to identity formation. To ignore these

relationships and try to classify the data in strict distinct categories would have been to force an interpretation on the research that would not have been true. To fully maximise the potential of the data available, a separate coding system was used that would easily alert me to any linked ideas. To produce this, each session was given its own separate document where the basic themes, and accompanying statements, were written down. These statements were then classified by abbreviated codes that would lead to more in-depth examinations on the corresponding documents mentioned above. Again, this thematic method was slow in construction but ultimately allowed me to quickly access various levels of data that were required later on. It also aided in displaying how many of the topics which were covered had very strong links to each other. This revealed many interesting patterns that had not been immediately evident either during the sessions, or at the start of the research phase (Seale, 2004; Garnett, 2000).

As information was analysed after each session, it continually allowed me to refine my understanding of how adolescents were engaging with each other through a variety of digital platforms. This again encouraged an open mind set throughout each qualitative interview, as the quantitative data revealed that despite the open preferences that many individuals reported, the vast majority of all teens in this study used all types of social networks. This led me to consider, and explore in more detail, why the verbal reports which were received did not match with the statistical data. This example is typical of the positive benefit of using a mixed method approach in this project; where the combination of quantitative and qualitative aspects allows for the testing and production of generalizations within a sample group (Seale, 2004).

## **Ethical Considerations**

As those under 18 are (in the eyes of the law) still the responsibility of guardians and parents, involving them within social research means that a number of precautions must be taken. It is important to guarantee that every participant is given the chance to offer informed consent (Morrow & Richards, 1997; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). This means that participants are given every opportunity to understand all aspects of the study and are able to make a decision based upon these facts. In order to conform to the ethical framework established by the Loughborough University Ethical Committee, and the British Sociological Association's 'Statement of Ethical Practice' (2002), it was necessary to ensure that a detailed description was offered to both parents and children about the nature of the study and what it involved.

A key consideration when reaching out to non-adult participants is the manner in which details about the study are delivered. Whilst older figures are able to read larger swathes of text, it was thought unlikely that those between the ages of 11-16 would find these documents interesting or understandable. To overcome this, all paperwork was structured so that it was easy to read and could be understood by young individuals. This ensured two things. The first was that the standard ethical and procedural guidelines were observed. If children under the age of 18 are to engage in social research they still require consent from those in loco parentis (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Fargas-Malet et al, 2010). The second aim was to ensure that participants were fully informed of, and understood the nature, purpose and outcomes of the research regardless of age (Tisdall et al, 2009). For young participants a separate information sheet (located in the appendix) was used when sending out documents via schools, or issued before at the start of homes



interviews. This offered the same information as the adult sheet but in simpler and shorter terms. It also sought to appeal to the adolescents on a level that would be more relatable, i.e. likening the thesis to a school project and giving the details of the appropriate supervisors and governing bodies as if they were teachers. A Frequently Asked Questions document was also used to ease worries felt by some parents (see appendix). This explained the selected age range and the social networking sites that would be analysed. Local families, who were happy to include their children, all received the same documents as those in schools and the same introductory process was followed to ensure that the study was morally and ethically sound.

Involvement was determined by active consent; whereby parents/guardians were required to sign and return a form that indicated they had supplied consent for their child to partake in the study. The act of not returning the slip was taken as an indication that the parent(s)/ guardian(s) did not want their child to participate in the study (Ellickson & Hawes, 1989). However, even if consent was supplied by the guardians, it was stressed to the child that the final decision to involve themselves was entirely their choice; thus respecting the belief that children are their own social actors and capable of making important decisions (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000).

Participants were also informed that they had the capacity to opt out at any point up until the publication of this thesis (Backe-Hansen, 2002; Heath et al, 2007). This was important in producing an ethically sound project; especially as some questions asked about very personal social relationships and beliefs. Whilst talking through the study in greater detail with potential candidates they were encouraged to ask questions and speak

out should they wish to leave the study at any point. This was based upon acknowledging the power of consent from within children, alongside the written consent given by guardians (Backe-Hansen, 2002). During the project, no individual requested to leave and there were no complaints received about the sessions or treatment of any participants.

Before beginning a series of interviews, the school or parents within the home were asked if they would like to sit in on the session. This was despite the negative impact that the addition of a chaperone, or authority figure known to the participant, could produce. Evidence of the detrimental effect of chaperones is highlighted by Livingstone's research in her EU kid's online study. The presence of an individual who is not a key part of the research might cause a young child to be more reluctant in opening up for fear of repercussions to information they may reveal. Furthermore, if schools had chosen to assign the researcher some of their working resources (i.e. teaching staff), further conditions and restrictions could have been imposed upon the research (Livingstone et al, 2008). However, the revised documents and access strategies used by the researcher meant that there were no occasions when an interviewer was overseen by another adult figure.

The identities of the participants have been fully anonymised, using pseudonyms selected by the participants. Allen and Wiles (2016, 162) note that allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms is "a useful part of both the content and the process of the research". Choosing pseudonyms gives participants the opportunity to direct how they will feature in an academic study whilst also ensuring that the privacy of those who take

part is upheld. It also encourages participation and makes the process more informal for teenagers (for instance some of them elected to choose a comical pseudonym).

Finally, in addition to the documents already listed above, a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check was also carried out and the subsequent certificate used to verify the credibility of the researcher. This demonstrated that the bearer of the certificate was safe to interview children and had no criminal convictions<sup>4</sup>. This provided a level of legal backing for the researcher, allowing them into environments with children, whilst also highlighting them as an approved researcher. One of the most important factors when using these documents was to ease parental fears and boost confidence in the study. Through the combination of legally sanctioned paperwork, and carefully crafted documents that sought to place the power of consent into the hands of informed children, this study was produced in an ethically minded manner.

### **Reflections on the Reflexive Process**

The opening sections of this chapter explored the role and value of reflexivity within social research. In this section I outline specific aspects that I believe influenced my study. The first issue concerns the age gap between myself and participants. In some cases this difference was nearly a decade and could be both advantageous and problematic. As I was part of the first generation which adopted social networking as an everyday practice, I shared some insights into the behaviours of adolescent participants. Indeed this understanding of social networking and adolescent development was a key factor in why I wanted to conduct this project. During interviews or focus groups, this knowledge served

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that this is now called a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check.

to break down barriers because I was able to show a shared understanding of the issues being discussed. As I demonstrated a familiarity with the activities which adolescents performed as part of their every-day routine, responses were more forthcoming. On the other hand, the difference in age meant that many of the behaviours which were reported were not recognizable to me. This allowed for a level of objectivity when examining these aspects as they could be compared against practices which were more familiar.

However, the presence of an older adult figure could also have affected individual's ability to respond (Spyrou, 2011). If the participants viewed me as another example of an adult, or a figure of authority, they may have been reluctant to divulge personal information. This could be because they felt that responses might have resulted in sanctioning or shown them to be immature or irresponsible (Raby, 2007). Although I attempted to alleviate these concerns through emphasising the knowledgeable role the teenagers had, and that they were able to leave at any point, there is no guarantee that everyone will have felt at ease (Mayell, 2000).

There are further factors which also likely impacted responses. In discussions of gendered activity, my gender will have been pertinent (Herod, 1993; Kusow, 2003; McDowell, 1992; Takeda, 2012). This is relevant in exchanges that sought to explore performances of masculinity. My combination of age and gender might have influenced some of the younger male teen's responses. During exchanges it is possible that reactions might have been supplied in an effort to perform a masculine character that they believed I would judge appropriate (Ward, 2016).

In **Chapter 8** there is a discussion of the role of male banter. This is a social practice amongst boys which I was well accustomed to, and had featured frequently during my own development. My experiences of banter are responsible for being particularly sensitive towards the subject and for giving it the subsequent attention that it received during sessions. Despite not initially attempting to focus on this exchange, prior knowledge about its dynamics allowed me to insinuate myself into conversations which explored it. Thus it is likely that my mixture of gender and age helped in prompting responses which revealed elements of these masculine interactions.

Similarly, some female responses which explored gender might have been aligned with traditional feminine values, or chosen in deference to the gender of those present (Galam, 2015). There is the possibility that some teenage girls might have consciously performed specific roles they felt were required when speaking to a male of a certain age. These could contrast with responses they might normally give (Galam, 2015). However, this does not negate the value of any of these discussions. Instead this dynamic is important to acknowledge when exploring the relevant data and seeking to contextualise the responses given by these girls: “This situational and contextual appreciation of the role played by gender in fieldwork relations engenders a dynamic perspective of how gender interacts with other social and cultural categories and factors germane to the research” (Galam, 2015, 3.2).

Whilst I did have some prior knowledge of Facebook and the activities/behaviours which might be encountered, steps were taken in regards to other platforms to ensure a level of

detachment from the investigation. Applications like Snapchat or Instagram, whilst known to me, were not methods of communication that I used. This lack of familiarity meant that any information received about them was without prior context and required further investigation or verification. This provided a fresh comparative perspective on the relationship between adolescents and these social networking sites. This was especially true during interview sessions where a lack of knowledge was highlighted, and participants were prompted to justify answers and explain new technologies. Exploring these new platforms prevented a biased focus on Facebook and also explored the theoretical life cycle of social sites as individuals spoke about transitioning between them. It is my belief that these varying levels of experience allowed me to highlight familiar aspects and explore them in new contexts, through drawing upon participant's responses. This is evidenced in the later chapters that note that even newer social platforms have fallen prey to some of the same mistakes that were reported on Facebook.

A final element that relates to my status as an adult figure is the influence that school based interviews can have on subject's responses (Edwards and Alldred, 1999; Westcott and Littleton, 2005). Whilst the large age gap might curtail some individual's confidence in speaking about intimate issues, having to do so in an environment that they associate rules and public identities with can potentially be even more detrimental (Punch, 2002; Spyrou, 2011). Overcoming this association and emphasising that all responses would be kept confidential and not shared with guardians was crucial in trying to break this perception. On the other hand, in larger focus groups where individuals were amongst class mates, it was impossible to provide a space where responses would be private. In these settings all interactions were witnessed by peers. This means that some teenagers

will still have felt unable to express themselves because of fears about judgement from friends and classmates. Unfortunately, logistical issues within schools did not allow me the option of conducting further personal interviews.

It is these same logistical issues which are responsible for the strong bias of boys versus girls within this study. Due to issues of access and time, the schools which I was able to include within the project were either predominantly all boys, or included very few girls. Although I have attempted to provide an even display of evidence from both genders, it is likely that there will be a degree of detail (or 'richness') within masculine behaviour explorations that are not present within female based analysis. This is a concern which, given time and resources, I would seek to address in further social research.

## **Chapter Five: “It’s just banter mate”: Social Ordering through Masculinity**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will explore how teenagers in this project use specific gendered behaviours and characteristics to order their social status through appealing to, or fighting against, the very same standards of gender. In many interviews, in a range of settings and age groups, there was an emergence of common themes which suggested that stereotypes about feminine and masculine characteristics are responsible for the structure and role of certain types of interaction. The following extracts will explore how beliefs about strength and independence informed how teenage boys sought to produce their male identities and how they were in turn confined by these ideas. Furthermore, the data in this chapter (and the next) will examine how many teenagers label conflict amongst peers, or identify instances where there are social tensions, in a manner that draws upon gendered constructs. For female teens this concerns how gossip and drama are structured and perceived by either gender; this is introduced in the latter part of this chapter but focused on in the next.

This current chapter will look at the separate social mechanism that male adolescents lay claim to: labelled generally as banter. This was perceived to be a very distinct process from anything that might be associated with female interaction. Through exploring the perceptions these teenagers possessed about specific types of male and female communication, and how they were directly linked to gendered constructs and standards, there is a further possibility of identifying whether there are indeed differences in behaviour amongst male and female teenagers. This will aid in answering if the



stereotypes that are traditionally used to dictate appropriate gendered conduct are being reproduced via social networking. Furthermore, this chapter will indicate how the processes of banter and drama allow these teenagers to frame and govern interactions in a manner that influences their identities and social status. As these adolescents follow set gendered roles and attempt to negotiate them, they are engaged in the process of enforcing and producing social norm values. This is a crucial point which will form the basis of arguments in proceeding chapters which examine how various forms of capital are created through publicly displaying approved group norms. This brings us to banter and conflict.

#### **Banter vs. Bullying (a): Conflict, banter and Gender Identity**

In many interviews, there were examples of (or reports) of male individuals appealing to 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1990) when interacting with other male teens. This strategy was often part of trying to elicit positive reactions from their peers whilst displaying dominance and highlighting other males as inferior. Boys reported, or performed during interviews, interactions where they struggled for dominance amongst their friends and attempted to negotiate gendered values and their own identities.

When discussing male specific interaction, one of the most common social elements mentioned by both sexes was the presence of banter. As the statement below highlights, banter was a feature of male interaction that was remarked upon by both sexes and indicated as a frequent element in the majority of communications both offline and on:

“I think that when you see boys post pictures up, all their friends are commenting on their pictures and starting banter and stuff.” (Interview with Anna, - Ref 1)

Banter is a precise yet complex term that can both detail an action, and define its social effect. It is used to frame certain male activities or comments and affect the way that they are perceived. It features most commonly when males attempt to ridicule or verbally abuse another male peer, but do not wish their actions to be viewed as indicative of an interaction that, to an outsider, might be classified as bullying. In a study on the nature of team work amongst colleagues in an office team, Hawkins notes that this male discourse (which in her study is dominated by the sexualisation of women) is used to create “a pecking order amongst consultants. Rankings in teams are informed by the extent to which individuals demonstrate their commitment to Spotlight by embodying masculinist team values...” (Hawkins, 2012, 10). Furthermore Hawkins notes that men were “expected to demonstrate their commitment to the heroic masculinity by engaging in competitive one-upmanship about their sexual prowess” (2012, 13). Through the subjugation of women (by using language which marked them out as playthings) and also by displaying other male efforts to be inferior to their own, men could attempt to influence their social status. Eder (1995) finds that banter is an expression of gender tension and sexual aggression manifested through teasing and insults, whilst (similarly to Hawkins, 2012) Stein (1993) links such practices heavily with sexual harassment: “Both studies found a link between sexual aggression and bullying behaviour in which boys as well as girls were targeted” (Eder & Nenga, 2006, 169).

Whilst these studies explored banter, and the negative connotations and practices which are associated with it, Williams conversely examines its role in the maintenance of health and masculinities amongst UK fathers: “It was clear to the author that ‘having a laugh’, ‘banter’ and ‘taking the piss’ were pleasurable and important aspects in which fathers talked about their health experiences” (Williams, 2009, 74). Williams focuses on the aspects of humour which tend to characterize many of these experiences between men, and which were often cited during this study. He states that there was an important link between both banter and humour, as the presence of both of these aspects were necessary in framing the interactions between men as an enjoyable past time, where experiences and ideas could be discussed in a way that displayed masculinity. Williams notes that the role of humour was vital not only in creating interactions that were enjoyable, but also a method of performing the role of an accepted social male:

For fathers within this study, the enjoyment shared with other men is highly valued but is also underpinned by the experience of being a man with other men. Indeed, fathers also talked about humour as being linked to experiences of change...Findings here are consistent with Coates’ (2003) work, which found that ‘having a laugh’ is important for men, in that having a good sense of humour is consistent with being a man, or being a ‘normal’ man as Coates (2003) also found. (Williams, 2009, 77)

He notes that banter could both strengthen relationships amongst men, by asserting the value of specific norms like heterosexuality, but also alienate others who do not fit within these ideas or who did not attempt to participate through engaging in the same manner.

This means it can establish group boundaries and specify a collection of individuals as negatively different. Through producing an idealized norm, which others can be nurtured into through positive and negative reinforcements, there is also the creation of a marginalized group who are discredited for their lack of inclusion or ability to take part (Goffman, 1963). This is worth bearing in mind as we later explore interactions between a group of boys who vary in age and in their performance of masculine identity. Especially when exploring how these potentially marginalized individuals try to assimilate themselves within the group standard through their management of group identity in relation to social norms (Goffman, 1963).

Traditional ideas of masculinity tend to link the idea of 'proper men' with being able to act independently from others, with little care for their actions or thoughts should they contradict the standard of a 'real man' (Connell, 2005). However as Connell points out, the problem with this lies in being able to definitively point to, and act in accordance, with the roles that are thought to comprise true masculinity. This confusion and variety in how cultures and societies perceive hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) leads to a conflict in how men go about presenting their male ideas and how they conform to what they think is required of them. This can lead to a conflicting array of requirements that are necessary to ensure inclusion within a group, but which can also potentially exclude others who do not share the same values. As Connell (1990) points out, a man attempting to display prowess through sporting achievement may also have to forgo many of the other typically male activities (like drinking or smoking), which could affect his performance. This is a simple example of the difficulty that many individuals face in the negotiation of their gendered identity.

Despite claims that banter is enjoyable and beneficial to those who engage with it, Williams (2009) found that it could also be part of a system of isolation that targets individuals through ridicule or even uses humour to mask the true feelings of those involved. Rather than expressing important information about how they felt, regarding health of family issues, humour could be used to cover both embarrassment and vulnerability:

Findings do indicate that while humour, for fathers, was used to reduce tension, or hide embarrassment, humour was also linked to their gender identities as Coates (2003) and Chappie and Ziebland (2004) also found. Fathers used humour to divert attention from their sense of vulnerability as men, regarding health concerns and were attempting to demonstrate they were 'normal' or 'proper' hegemonic men. (Williams, 2009, 79)

These academics have explored how banter facilitates interaction amongst men and how it relates to the production of masculine identity. These are two important issues when examining gendered behaviour, yet these works also fail to acknowledge exactly how banter is constructed and the rules that govern its usage. More importantly, much of the work that has been conducted on banter has also likened it, or directly linked it, with bullying (Stein, 1993; Eder & Nega, 2006). In these accounts, the authors have dealt with banter from an outside perspective, or have noted the outward effect of these male interactions from the view point of women or parents. This has included explorations of how banter can affect women in the working environment or how much of what

constitutes these exchanges can be argued to appear like many antagonistic statements that are found in bullying situations. Although an initial glance might support ideas that the harsh jibes are similar to such interactions, there is evidence in this work that supports the idea that it is in fact a very distinct and consciously different process, at least in the eyes of the teenage males that were spoken to. In the segment below we encounter how some male teen's reference banter and justify its inclusion within their communication; with a special importance placed on ensuring that it is not referenced in a way that relates it to bullying.

(This discussion follows on from an anecdote about bullying from Mark.)

Interviewer: "In terms of social networking have you experienced times when there has been conflict?"

Mark: "There's a bit of banter"

Interviewer: "What do you qualify as banter?"

Mark: "Something that both people find funny"

Interviewer: "Ah right so you've made it clear there that it is not bullying, yeah?"

Mark: "Yeah"

Steven: "Yeah"

Interviewer: "So how often do you think, something crosses over from banter to bullying? Or how much is there of either/?"

George: "/I don't think I often see bullying. There's not really much of either. There's a bit of banter between friends"

Interviewer: "Yeah"

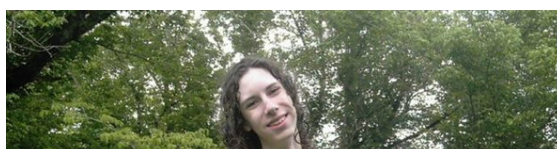
George: "Not really bullying."

(Interview with a group of year 8 boys- Ref 2)

In this extract there is a clear emphasis placed on stating that the banter between these male peers is definitely not something which could be defined as bullying. The speaker in these sections dictates that it is an activity where all involved enjoy humorous benefits and on three occasions, within one short segment, he repeatedly distances this from acts of peer discrimination. Although Mark identifies banter as a form of conflict, he and his peers –even after prompting by the interviewer- continue to distance this behaviour from an act that might be classified as harassment. This was a theme that is repeated throughout the following extracts, and the study as a whole. Initially it seemed clear that the reason for this attempt to separate the two forms of interaction was to avoid being targeted by guardian figures who might view such events negatively. Through reframing their verbal exchanges, these boys can continue to engage in an activity that, to an outsider, might seem detrimental to their friendships; as will be seen further on, the content of these exchanges can be both insulting and deliberately provocative. Although this could be a likely factor for their defence, it is also plausible that their perception of banter is linked to specific masculine concepts that relate to how it is used as a social process (this is covered later in the chapter). Indeed these masculine standards are perhaps the reason why it was difficult to ascertain whether any male teenager felt that their inclusion in banter had been more akin to bullying; as it is likely that some boys will have been offended. This is also explored further on in, but we must first explore why these participants were so keen to avoid connotations between banter and bullying.

Although bullying another boy does provide the opportunity for an individual to demonstrate and enforce social power and dominance (a key aim of successfully 'doing boy'), openly victimizing another can also contradict another equally important characteristic of masculinity; fairness and positive morality (Frosh, 2001). There is a need to both display influence over another, but do so in a manner that is perceived to offer each participant a fair chance of responding. This is perhaps the key difference that can be noted between banter and bullying. It allows for an individual or group to mock another peer and target their perceived masculine credibility (Williams, 2009). However, the way in which this ridicule is structured, through offering the targeted person a chance to respond, frames this interaction in a way that prevents it from appearing to be a form of personal persecution. Whilst bullying focus on the exclusion of an individual outside of the group (and cares not for their reactions), banter only functions successfully when it is shared between members of a community who are all offered an equal chance to respond and contribute to the groups interpersonal cohesion.

A good example of banter is noted by Dash when he talks about 'tagging' male friends in online photos. 'Tagging' is a function on certain social networking sites which alerts the 'tagged' to the presence of a photo. It is used to show who was present within the scene of the picture, share events that friends have experienced together and allows peers to witness these photos online and the relationships that are present. However here it is used instead to imply that the subject of the photo is the same individual as the one who is tagged; despite this being incorrect. In this instance the photo that is used as the vehicle for this jibe is that of a man classed as 'skinny', with the words 'He lifts' typed





below. Below is a possible example of one such photo which might be useful in providing a context for this discussion:

*(Fig.1)*

Interviewer: "What do you think boys do on social networking?"

Dash: "Taking the mick out of each other."

The group agrees with a choruses of 'yes'.

Dash: "There are a few pictures with like, we tag a few of our thin friends in, say like 'He lifts' and stuff"

Laughter from the group.

Dash: "Just tag people in"

Michael: "There's a meme on the internet and it say's, 'The reason why women have small feet is so they can stand close to the cooker'"

Charlotte: (Laughing and rolling her eyes) "Yeah they like stuff like that"

Interviewer: "So...uhm...it's sort of a reissuing of male culture then. What you lot would consider to be masculine"

Dash: "Banter"

Interviewer: "Banter?"

Charlotte: "A lot of banter"

(Interview with Dash, Michael and Charlotte, Ref 3)

By traditional standards of masculinity, men who have a lack of muscle or do not engage in physical activities, can be viewed as inferior to other males who do possess such qualities (Connell, 1990). Although the rise of a new male aesthetic promotes the image of man that can explore both feminine behaviours and attitudes, there is still a strong argument that a powerful physicality is rooted in the projection of the hegemonic man (Connell, 1990). By tagging his friend in the image of the skinny man within the photo, Dash is attempting to appeal to this gendered construction. He aligns his friend with this inferior image whilst positioning himself in opposition to it.

The use of the words “He lifts”, like the ones pictured above, further serve to damage the ‘tagged’s’ masculine capital- albeit in a slightly different way than those in the image. “Do you even lift?” is a common male insult that alludes to an individual’s lack of physical ability to move weighted objects. This is not a positive comment for those boys who are in search of positive male capital, and Dash’s choice of phrase (“He lifts) is arguably just as damaging. This is often placed on similar photos with similar subjects and has the same aim. However, the phrase here is meant to imply that in this scenario, the individual has attempted to take part in a physical activity but has failed to meet approved gender expectations. This can increase the negativity associated with the image and the tagged recipient as it demonstrates a failure of masculine control and dominance; the victim is simultaneously thought to be weak and unable to affect a change regardless of their efforts.

It is also necessary to note the inclusion of the controversial line that focuses on female role and physicality. Although this was not part of an interaction in the context of male focused banter, it would be remiss to ignore how such views (which are constructed in the same 'meme' style manner as above) relate to gender perceptions and how they feature as female directed banter.

Michael: "There's a meme on the internet and it say's, 'The reason why women have small feet is so they can stand close to the cooker'"

Charlotte: (Laughing and rolling her eyes) "Yeah they like stuff like that"

(Interview with Dash, Michael and Charlotte, Ref 3)

After the issue of male behaviour is raised during the discussion, Michael expresses the above statement. This is perhaps a more common idiom than those encountered in this chapter previously, and is linked to traditional stereotypical representations of gender. The meme draws parallels between the sizes of female feet and an affinity for domestic chores. The underlying message is that a women's place is to serve in the kitchen, presumably to her male partner or family, and the nature of her physiology supports this. These connotations relate to a physiological difference which is used to justify a sexist comment. These comments are not unique to the internet, or unheard of, and have been the staple of a number of cultural jokes or references over a long period of time. As we have noted earlier in the chapter, male banter can often revolve around derogatory comments focused on women, which aim to enhance masculine credibility at the expense of the subject of the comments (Hawkins, 2013). Similarly, Stein's (1993) studies found that banter could target women just as much as men.

An interesting issue for this study is the reception that this remark receives from the females present. Rather than indignation or disagreement it is greeted with laughter, and exemplifies language that is used in order to create gendered boundaries. At first glance, Charlotte's humour could be taken as an indication that she agrees on some level with the comment. Yet when it is paired with her classification of "*They* like stuff like that", it arguably indicates that she is using a semantic choice which defines boys as belonging to a lesser group. Her laughter is not aimed at joining in on the meme that attacks her gender, but more on the fact that her male friends find such ideas worth paying attention to. The intonation of 'they' and the eye roll that accompanied it (directed at the only other female present) seemed to highlight that she set herself and her gender above making such statements. In an adult setting, were such a picture to be distributed then it is likely that serious action might be taken. However, Charlotte's low key response, and Michael's inclusion of it during the discussion, illustrates how powerful a term banter can be for reframing ideas and interactions which could be controversial or offensive.

For these boys banter it is part of a cultural process of defining masculinity through, and against, representations of women and other men. In these examples they draw on provocative and controversial ideas whilst simultaneously defending their method of expression; citing it as harmless and fun. These findings support the argument that traditional gender generalizations have found new forms of expression in a digital context –through memes and tagging- and have unsurprisingly become common place in the lives of many teenagers. Further work would be needed to establish the role and view of

sexism amongst this age range and be necessary in verifying just how rife such issues are online.

However, these descriptions of common forms of male banter are excellent examples of how complex such small remarks are, and the social constructions upon which they draw. They are also indicative of how effective banter is for these teenagers in justifying comments which, without this framing, might be taken (and perhaps should be) very seriously. Indeed, one of the appeals of creating banter in such a distinct manner from bullying is to prevent adult interference. In many situations that were observed, the comments used would have been easily viewed as crossing an appropriate social line by teachers and parents.

#### **“It’s just banter though?”- Banter vs. Bullying (b)**

Despite the frequency with which banter and humour were reported together, there were also occasions where it seemed that comments were not always well received. In the interviews conducted, boys seemed loathe to bring up accounts where they had experienced, or had knowledge of, occasions where banter had taken a more serious turn. This is partly demonstrated in the chapter’s first extract which portrayed persistent attempts to differentiate ‘banter from bullying. However, it was also clear that there had been occasions where insults had led to more serious provocations:

Interviewer: “Has it ever caused you guys problems?”

Lionheart: (Laughing) “Yeah!”

Interviewer: “Yeah? How?”

Lionheart: "Like my friend Olaf has had, well, 'beef' as you call it with David Pringle for about a year. I don't know why but they've had a fight. Like two times about it, for no reason"

Interviewer: "Was that offline, like proper fight?"

Lionheart: "Yeah"

Interviewer: "Really?"

Kesha: "Olaf's an idiot."

Lionheart: "That's just on Facebook, but this guy David is like a complete muppet and Olaf said something and it just kicked off from there. I was with Olaf at the time and we were just laughing loads, because it's just funny."

Interviewer: "So you didn't get drawn into it then?"

Lionheart: "I, I, I got started on but I didn't do anything and neither did Olaf but then people started saying other stuff and Olaf got annoyed. But it's just ridiculous"

(Interview with Kesha and Lionheart, Ref 4)

Here the word 'beef' is used as a synonym for banter, and although it wasn't included as frequently, some boys made use of it to signify the same conversation topic. As the text shows, the heated interaction between both Olaf and David had risen to a point where a physical confrontation had been produced; an outcome that was perceived to be "ridiculous". These interactions and their interpretations by those involved, highlight the complexity of male versus male interaction that has to be navigated. Through using banter as a term to frame interactions that question and negotiate masculine identities, a

secondary effect takes place in which these comments are styled as something which should not provoke a physical confrontation. Despite many adolescents appearing to subscribe to the idea of male dominance supported through physicality, in examples like the one noted here, when a fight is produced it is deemed as a negative. For these teens, physical confrontation is perhaps viewed like this because it means that the social manipulation which is provided through mechanisms like banter, have become more of a hindrance than an aid. When a fight occurs, each male involved could lose more face (Goffman, 1959) than if they were to accept the original insults under the qualifier of banter. Therefore banter can potentially act as a form of damage limitation or face saving, not just for those who choose to use it, but also to those who are targeted (Goffman, 1959).

This is one of the most important and intriguing aspects of this form of male interaction. It offers the potential for all parties involved (the initiator and receiver) to influence their sense of identity and status amongst their peers. Depending upon how each party responds to the various comments and salvos that are aimed at them, they are able to fight for (and portray) a certain set of approved social characteristics and attempt to highlight who is more skilled at this performance. This means that banter has certain characteristics that can be used to distinguish it from bullying and which are not immediately evident on first examination.

The key difference lies in how comments are interpreted. Through accepting the banter that is levelled at them, and not reacting in an openly aggressive way, an individual is able to mitigate the chance of being viewed as a victim, or weaker male. Instead they have the

opportunity to later reclaim both status and image, by deploying similar verbal tactics in the same manner. Although a small blow to social credibility might be suffered initially when someone is the target of the jokes mentioned above, banter for both sides prevents more permanent hierarchical changes that happen when more explosive interactions are created through responding to such ideas in a physical manner.

It could be argued then that banter is a term that is beneficial to both aggressor and victim, providing an equal opportunities situation where the overall outcome of the individual's status is down to their ability to articulate their own positions and, often, their interpretations of gendered constructs. This is unlike the dynamic found in bullying where the outcome of those interactions seems to rely on the advantage of numbers or power, bonded together through targeting something related to a victim's character or identity; and crucially the responses of that victim are neither valued nor allowed an equal environment in which to be heard or considered. Therefore for something to be truly considered as banter, regardless of the relationship between the individuals who comprise that interaction, there must be a chance for each person to have their responses heard and measured.

Of course, the success of defending or instigating these remarks depends upon the ability of those involved to both create responses which are deemed appropriate in terms of the social beliefs amongst witnesses, and how well these comments are received by those around them. Whilst the two interlocutors might rally back and forth through a series of exchanges, it is ultimately up to third party witnesses who decree just who has gained the advantage. This is similar to other aspects of identity explored in academic work, which



have noted that the portrayals of self which are created, are only valid when they are accepted by the audience to whom they are performed (Tracy, 2002). The value of the responses and comments that form the banter, will be judged against the group's beliefs regarding masculinity, humour, verbal skill etc. and the mastery of how these aspects are combined.

From the extracts above it appears that a predominant requirement in gaining a social advantage is to ensure that what is said is either witty or controversial. Humour might be a necessary part for these groups in defining banter against bullying, in that the presence of laughter shared between all of those assembled is not a characteristic often found in the interactions between a persecutor and a victim. Where in those cases it might be laughter found only between those who constitute the aggressors. This is consistent with the work conducted by Williams (2009) and Hay (2000), which show that its presence is part of defining these interactions as an enjoyable past time between males. The presence of levity is a useful tool in promoting bonding amongst a group in some cases (Hay, 2000). Furthermore it can also portray the individuals involved as interesting and worth listening to closely. It seems prudent in these exchanges to ensure that remarks are comedic and well received by those who witness them, as eliciting a positive reaction from these 'judges' is likely to mean that the outcome is favorable. The frequency with which banter was mentioned, and the emphatic care that was taken in setting it out as both good natured and non-threatening on all sides, seemed to place this mechanism as a vital part of being masculine. To 'do boy' for many participants (stated by both boy and girl), seemed to centre around being able to hold one's own in the swift and brutal exchanges of verbal word play.

### **Banter and Boundaries: Offline and Online**

Furthermore, although the focus of these discussions about banter was contextualized by its appearance and production through digital sources, it is not something which appears only through a virtual screen. Indeed, like many forms of interaction amongst this generation, banter is able to slip between a myriad of platforms and physical interactions. In one interview, a conversation concerning horror videos which are shared online, prompted a series of exchanges that are useful examples of the similar way that banter functions within general conversation; although the form in which is produced is quite different to digital expression:

Anna- "There are so many videos on Facebook that come up now, like scary things, that I like, don't think other people should click on. But so many people sort of do it anyway."

David- "Yeah like also I realized, I saw a video, like it was meant to be an illusionist. And they made you stare right into this little dot."

The other boys chuckle.

David- "And then it turns into this scary face, screaming at you and..."

Juan- "And that's funny!"

David- "Yeah it is..."

Juan- "What it did to you is like when you take a little kid to do it..."

David fights to be heard over the clamour of voices and laughter.

David- "Yeah but you do it at night, and you're in bed and your're just like...(he offers a fake laugh)"

In this interview there were three boys and one girl, all of whom were friends through boarding at one school; Anna was the eldest of the group, with David the youngest and the other two located somewhere between. A key feature in this extract is the unspoken relationships that could be observed between these individuals. The opening lines between Anna and David were typical of many interactions during the session, in that it appeared that David was somewhat in awe of Anna. Often, after she had uttered statements or opinions, he would be quick to agree and show his support. Up until this point this had little impact on his standing in the conversation, yet on this occasion, when he once again sought to agree with Anna's statement, it placed him into a vulnerable position with his male peers. Through sympathizing with her sentiment about the role of online videos which are intended to shock, and mirroring the language she used, he incites derision from the others that are assembled. Whilst he has already, through his semantic choices, expressed his view of this video as scary, the others are quick to contradict this and instead define it as funny. This technique of conflicting opinion is used to imply that David, by finding the video shocking in the same manner as a girl, is less masculine than his peers; who in their own words have found it humorous. This is supported moments afterwards when Juan openly compares David and his reaction to that of a child. This is an example of how social norms, and those who are shown to deviate from them, are used to produce boundaries that can divide groups (Goffman, 1963). Through their response, which is openly show to contradict David's, these boys are performing their own acceptable hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1990). As these boys are older than David, it is also plausible that this entire interaction is evidence of the

younger teen being socialized, through a series of negative responses, into this male role (McGuffey, 2011). This is supported by David's attempts from this point onwards, to try and re-assert a measure of control and authority. In the following extract he is trying to once more appeal to this masculine standard and show that he belongs in the same group as his peers, by acting in a way that is similar to them. In his justification he appears to use the context of his environment to blame his reaction, which is in itself now edited to agree with the humorous response that was reported by the other boys. The fake laugh could be seen as his attempt to show that his previous utterance had been untrue and that he had considered the video just as his male peers had. As can be witnessed in the following extract, this is a tactic that he continues to employ in an effort to restore some semblance of bravado. It is vital to note that in this interaction, every time David responds he is interrupting Juan:

Juan- "There's a game/"

David- "Scary maze game."

Juan- "I don't know, it's like a line. You need to travel the ball to another point/"

David- "Yeah it's the scary maze game."

Juan- "And at the end, I don't know how you call it but it's like the/"

David- "Exorcist"

Juan- "Yeah the exorcist comes into the screen. It's funny."

Paul- "That's funny."

Juan- "It's really funny"

David- "It is but it gets really thin so you have to be careful."

Juan- "It's not so scary."

(Interview with Anna, David and Juan, Ref 1)

In an effort to recover a level of credibility, David attempts to display a higher level of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) than Juan, as Juan tries to explain the story further. Through supplying him with the words that he is either about to say, or at a loss for, David is perhaps trying to show now that he has a greater mastery of the topic than his friend. This would appeal to traditional ideas about masculinity and the ability to both dominate conversation and possess a greater knowledge than other men. After over exposing himself through agreeing with Anna earlier, and empathizing with her emotive response, here he can be seen to respond to the banter that was levelled at him. Whilst Juan had likened his reaction to that of a child, here David attempts to now gain the upper hand in the conversation and undo the potential damage to his social status. Rather than take umbrage at the interaction, David can be seen to demonstrate how the mechanisms of banter allow him to take on board the insult and later act in a manner designed to positively affect his image. Whilst also simultaneously trying to negatively affect Juan's status by trying to cast him as an individual who is reliant on David's help to elucidate his point. Notably, in a final effort to move past his earlier mistake, he agrees with his peer's assessment and chooses to link his reaction with the nature of the game itself. He refers to the level of control required to complete the game and activate the exorcist, implying that to achieve this fright you also have to have a good grasp of the game mechanics, as it gets harder to move the ball correctly. Once again this appeals to wider concepts of the role of men and their ability to successfully complete tasks, pairing his opportunity with the chance to be shocked with his completion of the difficult part of the maze.

These extracts and the varying tactics that are used by both Juan and David to edit and defend their masculine identities in the presence of the group are excellent examples of the many forms that banter can take. As noted earlier, this is not a social tool that is relevant to only a single platform, or encountered solely offline or online. The participants spoken to rarely distinguished relationships and interactions as being bounded by a specific digital device or application; indeed as can be seen from the previous two segments, the conversation centres around an online activity which then becomes relevant in face to face discussion.

In nearly all interviews, the use of the term banter was cited as a strictly male activity by both boys and girls. During the course of the process, as this emerged, it became necessary to once explore whether banter was a solely masculine activity, and if there was a social construct surrounding its use that excluded women from engaging with it. This leads us to an examination of whether girls can banter.

### **Female banter or Just 'drama'?**

The use of terms that describe specific teenage social interactions, and can also influence their construction, has likewise been examined by Dannah boyd in research that highlights a similar form of behaviour situated within a female context. Rather than noting banter, boyd investigates young girls' usage of the term 'drama'. Boyd states that 'drama' is a semantic choice which embodies a shift in how young teens visualize certain peer interactions that would be defined as bullying or aggressive conflict: "Dismissing conflict as drama lets teens frame the social dynamics and emotional impact as inconsequential, allowing them to "save face" rather than taking on the mantle of bully or

victim” (boyd, 2011, 2). Her work and its findings bear similarities to the function of banter, both of which offer individuals a chance to focus interactions in a style that allows peer hierarchy to be managed, without the protagonist appearing overly domineering and the target seeming weak or unable to retort.

In this study, the term ‘drama’ was a phrase encountered in a number of interviews and it was again reported by both genders; though not as frequently as banter. In the context of the discussions that it was included within, there was a clear parallel between both ‘drama’ and banter, yet also evidence of a distinct gulf between them. Often it appeared that banter was the sole activity of boys alone, and ‘drama’ was its female equivalent; each perceived to function in a unique manner. In the next chapter there is a closer examination of ‘drama’ and gossip, how these concepts were described by the adolescents and importantly how they appeared to feature as solely female tools of social ordering. However, an important part of this overall investigation into gender and social ordering, and how it intersects with social networking, is exploring whether girls could engage in banter and how both genders perceived female involvement. As the interviews continued during the research stage, and the frequency with which banter was mentioned increased, it was necessary to explore whether female teens reported using any of the same interaction styles and how they viewed banter and its effects:

Interviewer- “Girls do you banter?”

Charlotte- “No because, well me and Carmen could banter with each other but you can’t banter with people that would take it the wrong way. Because a lot of girls would.”

Carmen- "Yeah they are really sensitive."

(Interview with Charlotte and Carmen, Ref 3)

The discussion above indicates that there are some differences between how boys and girls are able to utilize banter, and with whom they are able to do so. From Charlotte's comments we can note that she believes that most girls are unable to interact in the same manner that has been ascribed to the boys in this study. Her justification presides upon the generalized characteristic that female teens are very sensitive to the communications they share, which implies that banter is ill-suited to their dialogue styles. Gendered judgments that pertain to beliefs about the normative behaviours of male and females was a theme that was encountered in a number of interviews when exploring girl's ability to banter:

Interviewer: "Is drama usually the word that you use to describe all the stuff that goes on? Are there other words that you say? Because boys have different terms to girls"

Chanel- "I think girls, no boys, are like the best people when it comes to gossiping. Like, do you know boys they will have a fist fight but five minutes later they're over it. They won't hold a grudge, but with girls they will hold a grudge. For as long as they live. It is so stupid."

Ives- "You can be better friends with a boy than you can with a girl because/"

Dior- "/It is so true"

Ives- "Because boys don't back chat about you. And girls just do"

Chanel- "And boys will confront you straight away, whereas a girl won't."



In these extracts, the discussions concerning female teens and their relationship with banter and 'Drama' results in these girls drawing upon perceived characteristic traits of their gender. There is an evident belief in these segments that the majority of females are unable to interact like men when engaging in communication that seems openly aggressive and prone to creating conflict. All of the girls touch upon this when they compare the sensitivity of girls against that of boys. Charlotte and Carmen highlight that banter for girls is not reliant on some of the same factors that it appears to be for men. Whilst being able to 'take the mick' was a necessary and standard part of performing masculinity for the male teens in this study, their female peers would be more likely to "take it the wrong way" due to an inherent "sensitivity".

This is further supported when the nature of female communication and its delicacy is raised by Chanel. In her comments she remarks on the physical confrontations that boys can have, which can lead to tensions being managed, dissipated and ultimately moved forward. For her, this behaviour is unlike the mechanisms which girls use, where interaction does not take place publicly or in a method designed to move past whatever issue it surrounds; thus resulting in girls using 'back-chat' and holding grudges. The underlying idea here is that the information and conversations which make up these conflicts are public yet fleeting for men, but passive and permanent for women. If this is true, and it is a perception that is held by the majority of adolescents, then it is likely to affect how genders employ and regard the role of banter or 'drama'. This mirrors findings by Frosh in his work on the performance of masculinity. He noted that:

Ironically, however, it was not boys who questioned girls' claims to be authentic, strong and sensitive, but the girls themselves, even when they presented boys as immature in relation to them. These girls often described boys as being less likely to 'bitch', 'bear grudges' and 'talk behind people's backs' than girls. Being 'bitchy' was usually spoken about in connection with girls competing sexually. (Frosh, 2001, 141)

The theories about gender that are used to justify and inform the responses above indicate a number of things about how both sexes utilize and value communication in the context of their masculine or feminine identities. More importantly for this chapter it indicates the specific positioning of banter and 'drama' upon the spectrum of communication between both men and women. This relates to the point that is made by Charlotte and Carmen and the level of relationship that is required between girls in order to engage in banter. For these two girls, their intimacy allows them to share jokes and comments which would be deemed offensive if aimed at anyone not in that friendship group. Their history together, and the shared experiences they have, presumably allows them some leeway to say things that other individuals couldn't without provoking negative social sanctions. This is in direct contrast to the more publicly open nature of the banter that the boys in this study were embroiled within. For them, anyone (regardless of whether they were a close friend or casual acquaintance in that peer group) were open for fair game; and it is worth again highlighting that 'fair' for them meant the opportunity for both parties to trade insults, and that this characteristic is important in the defence and construction of any of these exchanges. This difference is crucial to note because it is

the defining factor that separates these interactions from being classified as either 'banter' (which has very male connotations as we have seen) or gossip, which conversely is cited as a feminine activity. For a series of exchanges to be styled as banter, they must be direct, open and most importantly consist of comments which aim to a negatively alter another individuals identity performance. Charlotte and Carmen appear to acknowledge this, and it is their close friendship which allows them potentially banter without social repercussion, because they are interacting with each other specifically and consciously. This makes their communication different from gossip, which is a social tool used to provide judgments about a non-present other (see **Chapter Six**). However, unlike male peers, for them to use banter they must first be on comfortable terms with another female friend. This means that it does not have same effect or use amongst their entire female peer group, as has been evident amongst male teens, and raises the question of whether this is truly banter as it has been qualified. Furthermore, it prompts the question, why are these girls either unable or unwilling to use it in the same way as their male peers?

This difference between genders in how banter, or 'drama', is structured is based upon the values that each gender tends to strive for. To explore why banter does not work in the same manner for teenage girls as it does for boys, we need to briefly return to the underlying motivations that feature in its use amongst male groups. Hegemonic masculinity tends towards notions of strength and independence that are equally based upon being able to fend off attack both verbal and physical (Connell, 1990). For many male teenagers, performing their masculinity amongst their peers includes being able to both attack and defend the actions or thoughts of other boys, whilst proving their own as

superior. Through this socially approved method of conflict they are able to manage their social status and group identity. However in the pursuit of being masculine through using banter, whilst they might conform to these standards, they are simultaneously prevented from reacting emotionally or honestly if they are upset or angered. To do so would be to act in a manner that their female peers are associated with, as it would reveal that the jibes they have received have in fact engendered a heartfelt response; this in turn alludes to a weakness in the overall image of powerful and aloof masculinity. Therefore these boys bear some similarities to the group of fathers that Williams (2009) examined in that the humorous banter they use. Thus although banter can be useful for facilitating bonding and social ordering, it also prevents them from being able to openly express how they feel.

Throughout the interviews in which banter was discussed, it was difficult to establish how boys truly felt about the insults and jibes that they received and traded. During some discussions, like the one between David and Juan, it was clear that despite the protests that it was humorous and good natured, there were times when individuals were not quite as content as they would make out. This is understandable as it is rare that many people, even those who are apparently happily involved in a heated exchange of personal comments, are pleased to receive derisive remarks. Yet this was never openly stated. Unlike the female participants, who had no issue talking about the emotions that similar confrontations had evoked, the boys were always reticent to reveal how they felt; especially when it was related to how banter might affect them. Through claiming that hurtful insults are harmless, or downplaying the emotions that they might incur, these boys are trying to lay claim to those traditional ideas about what it means to be a

dominant masculine figure; in both their discussion with the interviewer and interactions amongst themselves. The combination of the forms that banter takes and the manner in which it is linked to theories of hegemonic masculinity and its production (which in turn offers the chance to positively affect both social image and status) make it a staple part of these teenagers' social dynamic. However, these standards and their relation to masculine concepts of strength are not the same ideals that women tend to strive for. This is why banter seems unlikely to be suited to girls' styles of interaction. The next chapter explores in greater depth some of the ways in which adolescent girls managed their identities and social capital through communication, but it is sufficient here to state that their methods of identity management (Goffman, 1959) are very different to those found with male teenagers.

Whilst boys engage in communication that is often openly confrontational, as this allows them to jostle for position in a form that is by its nature deemed as masculine, girls use other subtle tools to achieve a similar effect. These include interactions that are akin to traditional accounts of gossip, and also more contemporary online features which publicly identify key social relationships or identities which also relate to the management of status within a peer group. Crucially, in all of these methods there is a degree of non-direct confrontation that works on a more passive level. As the next chapter will explore, these methods are valued more to the girls who use them than any social tool that tends towards an openly aggressive style. Thus banter does not seem to have the same effect or appeal to women, as for them it is not based on the same underlying gendered ideas. Whilst men might aim to be seen as openly dominant and achieve this through aggressive and antagonistic activities, women tend to use subtler forms of communication that can

often appear more complex than the brashness that is found with banter. Although, as this chapter demonstrates there is a deeper complexity to banter than initially meets the eye.

Yet the restrictions that teenage boys face when it comes to their communication, and how it relates to a perceived gendered identity which might contrast with how they truly feel, are also similarly problematic for girls who try to engage in this form. The traits that many females are often praised for in society are built on being modest, kind, calm and non-confrontational (Lakoff, 1973). As the social tools they use acknowledge these ideas, at least on the surface, there is some evidence for the sensitivity that has been noted by the participants in the above extracts. (Please see the next chapter for further justification). If girls are meant to be all of these qualities, to engage with banter amongst the wider social group would perhaps be seen as unfeminine or breaking with the norm. Banter requires blunt and uncaring attitudes that match the remarks which are traded and which stand in stark contrast to traditional ideas about feminine behaviour. It is likely because of this that many girls would be truly offended if they were to be included in this process, having had little experience or desire to engage with it previously. The sensitivity that is linked as feminine is arguably also part of an effort to distance themselves from a very masculine activity, and create boundaries against those individuals who do use it. Evidence for this can be found in a later conversation between Anna, David and Juan where the more openly supportive roles of female teenagers are discussed:

Anna- "I think when you see boys post pictures up, they all, like their friends are commenting on all their pictures and starting banter and stuff. And arguments"

Juan- “Yeah, if a girl posts a picture, all her friends will say ‘Oh you’re so cute like’/”

David-“/Yeah!”

Juan- “‘I love this picture!’ While I’m sure that there are some girls who, that maybe think that, but maybe wouldn’t say that at school. In front of the girl, they wouldn’t say that

Anna- “Yeah”

(Interview with Anna, David and Juan, Ref 1)

Both David and Juan acknowledge that the interactions between girls, online in this context, are generally more collaborative than they might encounter amongst male friends. This is worth bearing in mind, alongside the female and male conceptions about banter, as we take a closer look at the role of gossip and other strategies that are used to determine social positioning. However on the surface, the comments that girls share with each other are unlike those that boys tend to use, and match with ideas about the nature of their femininity. Whilst banter is publicly confrontational, the tools that girls tend to use are much more discrete in affecting the same outcome. This is due to the desire to conform to female stereotypes and avoid breaking with conventional norms. Through the use of positive social comments they are both acquiescing to norms about feminine behaviour, and also potentially increasing their position amongst the peer group with displays of allegiance and support to individuals. (This activity is explored further in **Chapter Six**).

However, despite the frequent claims that many boys made about how different their methods of interaction were from the girls in their peer groups, in some all-female interviews it appeared that the distance between them was not as great as reported.

Judie- "Girl's gossip about other people. Like, 'Oh look at this photo! What kind of pose are they doing!?'"

Alis- "Yeah. Boys do it too! They look at photos and they are like 'Urgh what is she doing!?'/"

Judie- /"Yeah"

Alis- "They are like, 'She's gross'"

Judie- "Yeah like sometimes people comment on their, they just say it and show each other their phones and say 'Oh look at this picture'"

Interviewer- "Do boys just do it, do boys comment on photos of girls or do they comment on photos of boys as well?"

Alis- "Both."

Judie- "Yeah."

Interviewer- "So people use it to evaluate and judge one another"

There is an awkward chuckle between the girls.

Judie and Alis- "Yeah."

(Interview with Alis and Judie, Ref 6)

In this piece Alis and Judie note that boys, similarly to girls they know, use their social platforms or devices to evaluate the identity performances of others. In this discussion they classify this behaviour, for both genders, as belonging to a form of gossip where



value judgments are cast about a non-present individual. During the interview, this idea seemed to contrast with previous utterances about male behaviour and prompted the interviewer to seek further qualification of their statement. As one of the main themes that had consistently been mentioned through the discussions about banter was how it was something which was pursued openly and directly with the intended recipient, it seemed out of place to encounter an example where boys had tended to discuss others in a secretive manner. Furthermore, for boys to act in this way would arguably go against the standards of banter and masculinity they had claimed to follow. Just as it was difficult to ascertain the true feelings behind the verbal exchanges that boys traded, it was equally problematic to answer whether boys did in gossip with each other. For them, banter is the way they explore and define their male identities, and what a key part of these performances. On the other hand, gossip is something which is defined as explicitly feminine and thus valued less. This means that it is likely that many boys feel they must distance themselves from any involvement with gossip, despite perhaps still using it to pass group judgments on others behaviour, just as female peers do.

This indicates that some of the 'different' behaviours that boys tended to state as gendered were not perhaps as valid as they believed. Although boys would happily associate with banter as a social interaction, there were no instances where similar admissions were made about being involved with gossip; despite evidence that it is something which they have been known to use. This is another example of perceptions about gendered roles, and how they fit within identity performances, being used to enforce boundaries amongst the sexes. For example we can argue from this section that boys may banter, and openly do so with any male in their peered group, yet for girls to do

the same successfully it seems a very different set of requirements needs to be met. As we have explored, the reasons for this lies in the valued social norms that structure the appropriate standards of masculinity and femininity.

## **Conclusion**

Gendered norms, and their expression by male and female teens within the context of banter, has been the main focus of this chapter's discussion. Through exploring the structure of banter, the concepts it draws upon, and how it relates to hegemonic masculinity, we have seen how banter can be used as method to order both social status and individual identity. Crucially we have also noted how banter offers an equal opportunity for all involved to negotiate their place within a male group in a way that is not present in exchanges that can be classed as bullying. Through accepting jibes or insults, rather than responding aggressively or appealing to authority figures that might intervene, the initial banter target is later able to reclaim social credibility if they effectively retort and are judged successful by their peers. Although it is of course necessary to note that part of the role of banter is to reframe interactions in a way that prevents any bullying connotations, this does not necessarily mean that it is always taken humorously. Part of the issue of exploring banter and masculinity, is in revealing how male teens truly feel about its role and the exchanges they share; with evidence in this chapter prompting ideas that it is not always as jovial as many adolescents would believe. Finally, we have looked at how the male values that govern banter, restrict its use amongst female teenagers, and the restrictions or difficulties that are an inherent part of its construction.

One of the most interesting elements of banter identified during this investigation was that it was a male activity which (at least in this sample) transcended class and cultural boundaries. The participants selected in this chapter cover a broad range of ages (?-?), class backgrounds, educational abilities and cultures. However, despite these personal differences, there were no occasions where a teenage male questioned the meaning or role of banter during an interview or focus group. For many it seemed a practice as natural and every day as using SNS. It could be argued that this widespread familiarity and open acceptance of banter belies its powerful relationship with the creation and reproduction of masculinity for these adolescents. This was particularly noticeable during the all male focus groups that were conducted within Lester Grammar School for Boys. It was in fact these sessions which first drew the authors attention to banter (and provided some of the most striking material), when several boys would reframe their interactions as banter, or refer to it during anecdotes. This focus group method allowed for these teens to reproduce normal conversational styles, especially once they discovered that the researcher would not chastise them for this behaviour. Indeed, due to the male gender of the researcher and his own familiarity with the practice of banter, it is likely that they saw him as a complicit member of the vital third party who could judge and offer his own 'elder' masculine identity to their interactions. Although many boys discussed banter during interviews, it was the shared peer sessions that created opportunities for them to demonstrate and engage in this practice with gusto. However, as all sessions were conducted within the context of SNS, many teens would recall how these virtual landscapes offered equal outlets for banter. The extracts in this chapter highlight fluid nature of many adolescent interactions, which can seamlessly move between online and offline states. The digital worlds available to these boys allowed them to continue

exploring and defining masculinity through the activation of digital elements (e.g. memes) which facilitated banter. Although it is important to note that, as we will see in later chapters that explore the digital flow of information, these online interactions are often visible to a large and unknown social audience. In the context of banter, and the role that the third-party audience plays in determining success or failure, we might ask whether this shift in public scrutiny affects the potency of banter and its knock-on effect to the involved individual's social status. Further study would be required to determine this.

Finally, as many of the ideas that fuel the use of banter are concerned with displays of strength and dominance, this appears to limit its effect and desirability for female teens in their negotiation of approved feminine ideals. This brings us to an exploration of how these same girls go about structuring their peer group, and identifying the social tools they use instead of banter. **Chapter Six** will investigate the methods that are in use, offline and online, when these girls manage their social performances and relationships, and how these concepts are equally affected by the gender norms that have been introduced here.

## **Chapter Six: Adolescent Female Social Ordering: How Girls ‘Don’t’ Engage in Gossip, Stalking and Judgement**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines interactions which were as categorised feminine by the teenagers in this study. Whilst girls appeared unable to join in with banter, demonstrated in the previous chapter, they demonstrated their own form of gender specific social ordering which related to approved concepts of femininity. Here we will explore how these communication styles were structured by gendered norms, how they were expressed and finally how they were perceived or justified in their use.

Gossip has been associated with the term 'drama' (boyd, 2011), a female equivalent explored alongside 'banter'. Through exploring how both boys and girls position themselves in relation to gossip and 'drama', alongside the work shown on banter, we can ascertain how contemporary teenagers order social status. This chapter highlights how gossip is used to create social judgements which aim to enforce group boundaries, explore identity and status, and also importantly negotiate gendered norms. Necessary elements that an individual must satisfy in order to produce a successful gossip interaction (like controlling the flow of information between peers and maintaining face (Goffman, 1959)) are demonstrated as closely linked to feminine values promoted by social norms.

Once the role of gossip has been established in a traditional context (i.e. offline) we examine how such interactions are expressed via social networking. The reproduction of gendered values through digital platforms will highlight how social experiences amongst today's teenagers are not defined by online or offline boundaries. The ability to transcend these boundaries and communicate on many levels influences the value of the exchanges that take place. This in turn affects not only the importance of interactions but also how issues of identity and social status are negotiated. This is important to remember as the following chapters which will draw on these theories to show that, through following the social norms that are related to culturally approved forms of identity and gender, forms of capital can be produced which have a direct effect on younger generations' conception of self. However, to make sense of this we must first turn to a brief examination of gossip amongst female teenagers.

### **Gossip in Action - A Teenage 'Drama'**

Gossip amongst young women can be both moralizing and judgmental as “the continual activity of gossip allows individuals and communities to accumulate behavioural evidence about others and to form and refine judgments about their vices and virtues” (Tholander, 2003, 133). It can often act as system of evaluation that focuses on the reputations of those who are involved, using events or situations to explore their characteristics and social identities (Foster, 2004; Davis & McLeod, 2003; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). This in turn allows the gossipers to evaluate how they might react in the same circumstance, or how such events would affect their performances of self. Importantly though, these interactions act as a hypothetical plan as to how these individuals might act towards the target of the gossip. If the targeted individual is judged negatively or positively, depending upon if they are seen to be socially co-operative or not, then the gossipers might conform with the final group ruling (Barclay, 2004; Wedekind & Milinski, 2000; Sommerfeld et al., 2007).

Gossip is an interactional style which is often concerned with promoting social cohesion amongst those who take part, whilst vitally excluding others who are not deemed appropriate by the standards of that group; promoting in group inclusion and out group exclusion (Goffman, 1959). This can potentially lead to further cohesion amongst members within the approved community and, through the sharing of information, ensure that others are not targeted or exploited through negative behaviours from a specific individual (Willer, 2012). When gossip works for the benefit of a group in this way it is termed ‘pro-social’. However, often the exclusion of others is motivated by a desire to negatively affect how others perceive them and exert a form of social dominance; in the context of groups that utilise gossip for this effect, this is classified as ‘anti-social’ (Foster, 2004).

The following extracts provide an excellent account of gossip between a group of female teens. They epitomize many of the features that have been noted as important elements in the production of gossip. It demonstrates how these girls use discussions like this to explore their social world and position themselves within it, through judging and identifying with the values that belong (or do not belong) to that group (Gluckman, 1963, 1968; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). These interactions function as a tool for the exploration and creation of individual reputation (Willer, 2012). Although this is an example of gossip that transpired in a physical context, it is important to note that there are again mentions of digital activity; this links back to the ongoing argument that social networks are a pervasive factor in participants' daily interactions which are expressed physically and digitally.

In the extract below we witness Estee report a social conflict that had occurred at her school. Throughout, there are observable moments where each of the girls uses the story to produce their own opinions, and therefore social associations, with what is said. The following responses pertain to a conflict between two girls, known distantly through their attendance at the same school as Estee, which transpired over the course of a few days. It revolves around verbal comments made about one girl's family and the ensuing physical retaliation to this. The extract begins with Estee re-establishing her story after initially attempting to share it quietly with Ives:

Chanel: "Did they burn her foot?"

Estee: "No basically there is this girl and she had this fight, with this other girl on the internet. But I don't know what it was on. And there was a fight right. And this other



girl, that she was fighting against was like to her, 'Oh I just heard your Grandad died from cancer. He deserves to die.'"

(The other three girls gasp in shock)

Ives: "I know! How bad is that!?"

Estee: "And then everyone in the school, was like 'Ooh did you hear that?'"

(The other girls chuckle at her impression)

Chanel: (To the interviewer) "This is just teenage stuff"

Estee: "And then they got into school and the three of them were just sitting there. And she said 'Oh I heard what you said about my Grandad'. And they had a massive fist fight, like boys fight/"

Ives: "I would have done that definitely"

Estee: "Not slap fight likes girls do and pulling hair. Like actually fists."

(Focus Group (a) with the 'Perfume Girls, Ref 5)

In this extract, gossip is used as a way of examining the reputations of those involved and exploring their identities in relation to the behaviours that have taken place. The girls in this group have no connection with the individuals within the story, as even Estee is only dimly aware of these events because it occurred within her school. This means that rather than using gossip to influence the perceptions which are held about another, through spreading negative judgements, these girls use this exchange as an opportunity to explore and reaffirm their identities within the group.

An excellent example of this can be highlighted when we explore the reactions to the controversial line reported by Estee. For the majority who read this extract, it is likely that the

comment of “Oh I just heard your Grandad died from cancer. He deserves to die” will be judged negatively, as it was by the girls in the extract. This shared reaction across disparate audiences is important because it indicates a number of social norms that are located within this group and wider society. As this statement is provocative and evokes such clear reactions, it is a perfect example of how individuals can use gossip to evaluate crucial ideas. This includes exploring appropriate forms of reaction, for public and private contexts, as well as the repercussions of using these phrases or behaviours.

To remark on a family illness in a callous manner and cast their misfortune as something deserved seems both cruel and hurtful, not only for these teens, but also within wider society. These remarks seem more suited to interactions in the last chapter where boys tended to be purposefully push boundaries and elicit conflict. However, it appears that in this segment, this insult has resulted in producing a physical confrontation between the two girls. In the previous segment it was noted that fighting was frowned upon when it has transpired from banter, even though such conflict was viewed as strictly masculine, as fighting is seen as part of displaying dominance and strength. The relationship between fighting and masculinity is something which Estee negotiates in this extract with her description of events. As physical aggression is seen as being inherently male, when females engage in similar contact there can be negative criticism that relates to ‘ideal gendered behaviours’. These norms feature values which define the characteristics of the ideal women; a figure meant to act as peace keeper, mother figure and solve delicate situations with a calm and considered approach (Lakoff, 1973).

The escalation of the situation between both girls within this extract which results in a response that is physically combative (and thus potentially classified traditionally as unfeminine) demonstrates a breach of social etiquette. This is acknowledged by Estee, who declares that the confrontation contradicts how girls normally fight. She regards this outcome as masculine: "And they had a massive fist fight, like boys fight...Not slap fight likes girls do and pulling hair. Like actually fists." It is vital to point out these social nuances because they demonstrate how these girls use this situation to define their reactions and identities within its context.

Hall (2011, 39) explores perceptions of physical violence and gender amongst teenage girls, noting that "When society conflates fighting girls with masculine behaviour, it fails to see this type of female conduct as a dimension of femininity...physically aggressive girls will then be perceived as having abandoned their womanhood in order to adopt masculine traits". Estee's description highlights her conformity to these traditional concepts of gender. However it also simultaneously illustrates how important she perceives this fight to have been between those involved. Despite the girls within the story choosing to breach 'normal female behaviour', Estee and her assembled peers do not seem to pass any negative judgement. This highlights their empathy towards the victim of the story and their approval of the form of retaliation, even though such methods contradict with established notions of correct gender behaviour. Estee's expression of these emotions, which do not contain negative judgements, and her discussion of events with her friends, all form elements in her performance of being feminine. This allows her to conform to traditional ideas about gender within her group, whilst also exploring the possibility that there are occasions where it is okay to break from these beliefs.

Through creating this distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours, Estee not only frames the severity of the situation to the other girls but also performs her own interpretation of events. This is a key element of gossiping because, through recalling and expressing stories about social events, individuals can negotiate understandings of conventional group norms and how they relate to them. This is further demonstrated by the assembled group's reaction to this breach in 'normal' gendered conduct. Their sympathy towards the fight and appreciation of how the protagonist was reprimanded, highlights they are aware of the gravity of the cancer comment and concur with the retaliation towards it; despite it breaking with their 'normal' social conventions:

Ives: "I would definitely do that."

Dior: "Was that at Lemhouse?"

Estee: "No. Then they got split apart like by teachers and stuff. And the last lesson was ICT and a girl, who was a friend of the girl with the granddad who has cancer/

Ives: (Declaring) "Set fire to her shoe!"

Estee: "No she got a lighter, and crawled under the ICT suite and set fire to her all star [A brand of trainer]. And then walked out like 'Haha bitch that's what you deserve!'

(The girls all laugh)

(Focus Group (b) with the 'Perfume Girls', Ref 5)

Here Ives feels confident enough to hypothetically position herself within the situation and state twice "I would definitely do that". Through doing this, she not only shows support for

the victim of the story, but also with Estee's interpretation and her choice to share this event with the group. As Ives was the youngest individual present, it is likely that her vehement responses and bold statements are part of an effort to both be heard amongst her peers, and also establish her place within the group. By using declarative statements and placing herself within the story, she is openly choosing to show that her moral judgments are in line with her friends and that, by proxy, she is worthy of respect and attention. As all the girls have approved (on some level) the response given to the aggressor, and Ives asserts that she would have acted similarly, she likely hopes to gain a degree of status from this. Although the other girls do not respond as directly as Ives, their reactions are indicative of individuals using this story to perform specific identities and statuses within the group:

(The girls are still chuckling)

Dior: "It's not funny. But it is funny!"

Chanel: "That's crazy, who would do that!?"

Ives: "I'd love to see that!"

Dior: "I wouldn't do it but I'd love to see it."

Chanel: "It'd be so cool, like a movie."

Estee: "Imagine just standing there watching it happen to someone. Imagine what everyone would have seen. Bet everyone was in shock watching that!"

(Focus Group (c) with the 'Perfume Girls', Ref 5)

The groups laughter, with few negative judgements, fits with Griswold's (2007) argument that social acquiescence can be given through simply not offering any contradictory actions to a proposed judgement or behaviour. Normally we might expect criticism to be levelled at

an individual who publicly attacks another; especially in the context of the gendered beliefs noted above. However as the girls' response consists predominantly of laughter we can surmise a number of things. The first is that, as a group, these girls judge the verbal comment concerning cancer worthy of a physical retaliation. We have seen this already demonstrated with Ives's bold declaration. Secondly, by not verbally judging this reaction, they signal to each other that they agree with this behaviour and test out how they would respond to this situation. This is an important part of gossip in providing an understanding of acceptable social boundaries across a broad range of contexts. These extracts are great examples of a single exchange between individuals who are exploring social boundaries and consequences with peers through reporting social drama and sharing gossip. This brings us to a discussion of the other elements that are necessary in the production of gossip, when it is aimed at influencing the reputation of others. This includes controlling the flow of information, managing consistent identities and maintaining public civility (or face work) between groups.

### **Gossip, Information Flow and Civility on Social Media**

Although gossip can be used to share information amongst others, it is also often characterized by a motivation to cast negative judgments about another person who is not present. This is classed as anti-social gossip (Foster, 2004; Archer & Coyne, 2005). In a 'successful' gossip event, a small group might be able to create derogatory impressions of an 'absent other' (Leder, 1990) that can influence how a wider community views their identity. By reporting on information that is seen to be 'true', the storyteller can exclude the focus from the group at hand, and place them in "a lower [hierarchical] standing in comparison to themselves" (Tholander, 2003, 108). As this individual is not present, there are rarely any counter arguments made in their defence. Yet despite this absence, for this process to work

successfully, it requires a number of things from those who share information with an aim to influencing social status or altering perceptions of the individuals. One of the most important elements is the maintenance of a public face that is aimed at displaying a civil veneer. The purpose of this is twofold in attempting to protect the reputation of the gossipers, portraying them as individuals who do not seek to damage the face work of another, whilst also allowing them to carry out their judgement (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Dunbar, 1996, 2004; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2000). This means that whilst the gossipers work to uphold their reputation, often by pretending not to gossip, or engage in activities that reveal a lack of social co-operation, they also try to demonstrate the complete opposite of those that are targeted.

Whilst banter requires public displays of confrontation in order to draw upon the judgements of a third party, who judge the outcome of the masculine performances, the success of gossip is instead based upon being able to comment on someone without their immediate knowledge. Banter proceeds through openly confrontational exchanges, but gossip functions on a more discrete and subtle level. These levels of discretion are crucial during the first few stages of sharing gossip between individuals or groups. When interactions encounter slips that make them more public than intended, it can incite social sanctions that are manifested in tensions between groups or further gossip events that actively seek to victimise the offender. It is therefore critical, when using gossip as a method of social ordering, to manage the flow of information that is shared. It is important to examine this dynamic before examining how adolescent females use these processes in a digital context to manage social status, because information management relates to the performance of a civil public face

that is based upon specific feminine values of support and sociability (Lakoff, 1973; McCormick, 2015; Hopper, 2015).

The ease with which an individual can successfully manipulate their peers (consciously or not) can determine just how efficient and worthwhile gossiping is (Emler, 1994). Whilst those who are originally involved might be willing to support the claims created, which could be false or character damaging, others who encounter them are unlikely to share the same level of immediate agreement (as they are unlikely to share the same agenda). For new people to support this knowledge they must be assured that it is valid. Successfully 'spreading' gossip involves creating a monopoly on the information that others receive, and countering responses that might cast doubt on what is reported. In order for the 'gossiper's' story to be viewed as credible they must successfully communicate their news to every person that could be potentially involved, whilst masking physical or verbal clues that might alert others to the dubious veracity of what they are hearing. "Gossip offers a scope to manipulate the reputations of others, but with risks to the self when such manipulation is too transparently self-serving or clumsy" (Emler, 1994, 135). This can mean initially masking the presence of gossip from those whom the information relates to. However the presence of digital technology, and its capacity to easily (and sometimes unwittingly) share information very quickly to others, can increase the likelihood of making masking errors. Some teens revealed that sharing information with the wrong people, or failing to successfully hide the initial stages of gossip was due a combination of mental slips and social networking:

Blake- "Say if you're with your friend or something, and then like you're talking about someone or something -I haven't done this by the way- you're talking about



someone to THEM instead of someone else. And then they'll be like, 'What you on about?'. And you'll be like 'Oh uhm'. It can just kind of be upsetting. If you realize someone is talking behind your back."

Christine-(Chuckling) "Awkward"

(Interview with Blake and Christine, Ref 7)

In this extract, Blake reports occasions where slips have been made during communication. In this example, an individual has attempted to gossip about another with a close friend, but mistakenly sent her message to the person being gossiped about. The awkwardness that Christine remarks upon at the end, directly results from a clash of face work. Face work can be described as the presence of self that is directed outward into the social environment, and is something which is constantly under revision during all interactions (Goffman, 1959; Tracy, 2002).

Goffman (1959), in *The Presentation of the Everyday Self*, states that one of the main aims during a conversation is to ensure that all participants are able to maintain the cohesion of the dialogue; and also to take steps to prevent actions which might threaten this. This happens through supporting the performances of other people within the interaction, as well as working to successfully perform personal aims and identity goals. Though he uses the terms front and back stage, which suggest an immediate and physical setting, these semantics help envisage one interaction as having prominence in a specific setting with a secondary area that might reveal something more intimate about the actions taking place 'on-stage'. In the extract above, we could consider the interactions between Blake and the person she is messaging about as being 'front-stage'. Her communications here, in the

context of the extract, suggests that she is consciously performing a role that is aimed at maintaining good relations. The back-stage then, which is where her intentions might differ from those she actively displays front of house, is between Blake and her close friend whom she is messaging. An issue arises when she confuses these two spaces and 'performs' her message to the wrong stage. This reveals to the recipient that Blake has been expressing alternate sentiments to those she had witnessed and that there are conflicting face performances. For Goffman this would be classed as breach of face work, as the actors have revealed information that disrupts the pre-established structure of the communications. In clearer terms, occasions like this end with confrontations over these accidental exchanges, or the creation of social tension as the sincerity of performances comes under question. Thus the dialogue suffers from a breakdown as aims become conflicted and performances are shown to be inconsistent.

In an interview with a teenage boy, a similar situation was reported; this time concerning the boy's sister. In this case it was not a conscious slip that had created tension through revealing information, but a failure to prevent certain comments from being shared with a specific group:

Saab- "Yeah but most of the time if they say something they will always, if they are friends with the person who they are saying stuff about the will always block the post from them, so they can't see it."

Interviewer- "I didn't know you could do that."

Saab- "I don't know how to do it as well, but my sister, she did it with this person that she didn't really like, so she did it with her."

Interviewer- "Right okay"

Saab- "Its cos they were like enemies at that point. Sworn enemies."

Interviewer- "Do you know if she found out eventually what was said on Facebook?"

Saab- "Yeah they are bound too, as there is always that one person they didn't block who will find out and tell her."

(Interview with Saab, Ref 8)

Once more the dissemination of personal sentiments, which were not meant to be seen 'publicly', has awkward consequences for individuals who had attempted to control that information. Whilst gossiping online with friends, Saab's sister had taken steps to prevent her writing from being viewed by the girl in question; unlike Blake in the extract before. However, despite these actions, the nature of the social platform she was using allowed friends of the target to view these exchanges and relay this information to her 'enemy'. This illustrates another breach of face amongst those involved, where 'real' intentions have been expressed which reveal inconsistencies of character. The end result was that these two groups of girls continued to engage in a heated conflict that prevented future cohesive communications. In this example, all pretence of civility was dropped and the girls involved openly took sides, displaying allegiances to one party through their treatment of the other (expressed through further gossiping or a cessation of interaction with the other side).

Both of these extracts demonstrate how social interaction can be affected by accidental expressions of information that reveal flaws in public performances. Gossip tends to succeed when individuals are able to speak freely between friends whilst also ensuring that outwardly directed judgements are perceived, by the larger community, to be valid and do not

negatively affect the images of those within the in-group. This social damage is carefully managed by active attempts to hide evidence which indicates that the gossipers are manipulative or untrustworthy during 'front-stage' communication. As such interactions take place 'back-stage', to prevent individuals from being actively hailed as disruptive members of a group, it is difficult to know when these communications occur. Or to be entirely aware of what is being said about whom. Indeed, one of the most fascinating things about any discussion concerning this topic was the manner in which participants distance themselves from being associated with gossip. This would be despite admissions or evidence which revealed that they often draw upon this dynamic. As many individuals are perhaps acutely aware of the negative social fall outs which transpire should you be revealed as a 'gossiper', because this behaviour breaches the general aim of communication as a productive interaction, they likely will refute association with it. "A paradox of gossip is that it is ubiquitous, though there are numerous social and biblical sanctions against it. Most societies have explicit sanctions against gossip, and numerous cautionary narrative demonstrate its unwanted outcomes" (Izougu, 2009, 9). This juxtaposition between acting and denying (Izougu, 2009; Holgate et al, 2006; Lerner and Steinberg, 2009) was something that was keenly noted during talks about gossip and social ordering within an online context, as we will examine in the next section.

Here we have highlighted how gossip can be produced and manifested between girls through a mixture of online and offline communications. In these examples it resembles many of the typical features that have been used to classify specific interactions as being 'gossip-like', through offering opportunities to explore the social world, pass judgements and potentially influence how members of a peer group are perceived. Due to the structure of some sites,

and the manner in which they allow users to interact, individuals were able to make use of social networks to carry out these social goals. However, there is also evidence that the presence of these platforms has increased the challenges that are faced in successfully producing gossip interactions. Through exploring examples of these digital interactions, and the manner in which they were reported by adolescent females, we will be able to analyse how digital activities (alongside gossip) are influenced by gendered social norms. Through looking at the justifications for using communications like those we have discussed here, and their online counterparts, we can begin to understand how femininity is defined and reproduced by these adolescents. This brings us to an exploration of 'stalking'.

### **Stalking**

Like gossip, stalking was a social practice that was reported in discussions between female adolescents which explored habits they believed to be commonly practiced by girls online. The Oxford Dictionary defines stalking as "harassing or persecuting someone with unwanted or obsessive attention" (Stevenson, 2010). It further defines cyberstalking as: "The repeated use of electronic communications to harass or frighten someone, for example by sending threatening emails" (Stevenson, 2010). At first glance the connotations attached to this word suggest something both sinister and potentially malicious, and imply similar things about the intentions of individuals involved. Though it bears some relation to the traditional sense of the word, for the girls in this project the actual nature of it appears far less sensational in the context of social networking sites. Furthermore the definition of stalking that was provided by participants in this study bears only a passing similarity to that provided by the Oxford dictionary. As we will see below, whilst both dictionary definitions provide

accounts of someone actively harassing another (which is the victim is acutely aware of), stalking in this context is a far more passive act.

In this project, girls used the word stalking to define when an individual used the resources of social networking sites to investigate another person without their knowledge. As many digital platforms predominantly consist of user pages that are linked through search buttons or via both intimate and disparate relationships, it is easy to access the profile pages of others. In many cases, one user need only have a passing acquaintance with another and have been granted online friend status to be able to view all actions that are posted online. As targets of stalking are unaware that such scrutiny is taking place, given that it can happen at any point should a user have digital access, it is easy to perceive stalking as an activity that is just as dubious as its physical manifestation. However, although stalking was something which many did distance themselves from in the same manner that most chose to with gossip, it was not classed with the same connotations that the stalking or cyber-stalking possesses. Indeed for the female teens in this project, stalking was a natural part of their daily routines on social networking sites and could often be a form of 'research' that might aid or facilitate gossip:

Interviewer- "What do you think girls do on Facebook? Or What do you think girls do a lot of on Facebook?"

(The group laughs hesitantly and awkwardly)

Sarah- "Maybe stalk...?"

(There is again nervous laughter and relieved signs of agreeing)

Olivia- "Yeah!"

Sarah- "...other people!"

Olivia- "Yeah!"

Sarah- "When you're bored and then you go/"

Stacey- "Oh yeah I'm going to stalk her! Or him"

Olivia- "Then you cover all the profiles of the people."

Interviewer- "So you use it to check out the others in the social group?"

(The girls make noises showing they agree)

Stacey- "And like how did they change from one year to the other?"

Sarah- "Yeah! I love to see the first profile picture"

(The group chuckle and again agree)

(Focus group (a) with Sarah, Stacy and Olivia, Ref 9)

This extract describes the practice of using visual images (or profiles) that others have produced to form opinions of them amongst friends. Like the gossip between the 'Perfume Girls' earlier, a focus (in this case, the online content) is used as a vehicle through which judgements are produced and expressed. In the last chapter, a similar segment noted how individuals used their phones to access such images and show them to their friends, in order to initiate interactions that focused on critiquing what is displayed:

Judie- "Girl's gossip about other people. Like, 'Oh look at this photo! What kind of pose are they doing!?'"

Alis- "Yeah. Boys do it too! They look at photos and they are like 'Urgh what is she doing!?'/"

Judie- /“Yeah”

Alis- “They are like, ‘She’s gross’”

Judie- “Yeah like sometimes people comment on their, they just say it and show each other their phones and say ‘Oh look at this picture’”

Interviewer- “Do boys just do it, do boys comment on photos of girls or do they comment on photos of boys aswell?”

Alis- “Both.”

Judie- “Yeah.”

Interviewer- “So people use it to evaluate and judge one another”

(There is an awkward chuckle between the girls)

Judie and Alis- “Yeah.”

(Interview with Alis and Judie, Ref 6)

In the discussion that explored this extract in the last chapter, the lack of male attention to this practice was analysed and linked to ideas that open association with this behaviour would conflict with hegemonic masculinity. As sharing and commenting on photos, without the target present, is not a direct form of communication (as it relies upon more intimate subjective statements between friends) it contrasts with the public displays of dominance that are commonly characterised as masculine. The other side of this argument therefore should address how this activity is perceived to be, and openly stated as, something which female adolescents frequently do.

Just like gossip, for these participants stalking appears to be a feature of digital interaction that is constructed as feminine. Whilst teenage boys never mentioned taking part in stalking,



these girls have no issue with revealing (to the interviewer and friends) that it is something they often do. It is worth noting that this is the primary activity reported by the girls in the first extract, when they were asked which behaviours they believed epitomised female digital behaviour. Thus despite boys also being linked to this practice, the difference in how either gender chooses to associate with stalking, demonstrates how social norms that relate to gendered standards influence the perception of identical behaviours online. In short, although both boys and girl arguably engage in this practice, it is still only something which is seen as inherently feminine, like gossip.

Furthermore, whilst gossiping evidently still takes place in both offline and online capacities, the affordances provided by social networking sites seem to have provided new forms of resources for individuals to draw upon. Traditionally, exchanges where judgements are shared would be reliant upon reported events, like those noted at the start of the chapter. However the prevalence and availability of portable phones, which can access the internet and retrieve images or user's posts, allows adolescents to invoke these displays in their social discussions. This is an example of contemporary technology shifting how adolescents interact with, and negotiate, peer relationships. As technology has increased the frequency of communication, and the ease with which these exchanges can take place, it has likewise heightened the sense of pressure which accompanies the need to manage identity performances that can be constantly reviewed. In the following chapters we explore how modern technology has influenced these types of social pressures amongst teens and how this influences both digital behaviours and offline activities.

Stalking also bears a similarity to gossip when we explore how it is perceived by those who perform it. Earlier in this chapter gossip was shown to break with certain social etiquettes which are based upon social cohesion. Although many teenagers, and adults, do use gossip as a bonding tool, it is not something which is positively viewed; a sentiment that is shared when discussing stalking:

Interviewer- “But what would you think if you knew other people were doing that to your profile?”

(There are uncomfortable sounds made)

Olivia- “Not funny”

(The group laughs and murmurs agreement)

(Focus Group (b) with Sarah, Stacy and Olivia, Ref 9)

For many girls within this project, viewing the profiles of others and analysing the content with their friends, was a natural part of their daily routine. Stalking allowed these individuals to build up a collection of references which might be used to inform their gossip interactions and both explore and negotiate their peer environment. However despite frequently engaging in stalking, when the same girls were asked to think about it happening to them they did not welcome the idea. Thinking about other peers dissecting their own performance work appeared to make many uncomfortable as it forced them to realise the level of critique that their profiles might receive. Arguably the tension these girls felt when thinking about this relates to their understanding of how easily it can be to find cracks and inconsistencies in the digital identities they have created. This is especially powerful because the girls were aware, from their own actions, that these performances can be used draw conclusions about group

norms and related behaviours, which might be negatively used to affect their social status. This again relates back to Goffman's (1959) theories on the role of communication between individuals. When asked to consider how stalking might affect personal identity performances, these girls are able to understand that this activity can be used to break down cohesive public interactions and highlight inconsistencies of self. It is because of this reason they became uncomfortable during the discussion.

These theories highlight how social networking has influenced the manner in which individuals perceive and actively construct their identity alongside traditional interaction processes. Stalking, for the girls in this project, was a supplement to gossip. The level of detail that social networks can afford these teens in their critiques, offering almost unfettered access to the smallest of details over a broad time domain, has resulted in many adolescents feeling uncomfortable with the influence that such platforms can have on their social lives.

It is clear that stalking, like gossip, relates to activities that are held to be, in some form, societally appropriate for girls to be involved with. Although stalking is not an activity that is lauded as entirely 'proper', girls have little issue with acknowledging it as part of a feminine identity. Whilst boys, as witnessed in the last chapter, are very keen to distance themselves from any practice that is not connected to open displays of dominance. As this is an activity that is viewed as female, even though it is utilised by both genders as a form of social ordering through the moralising judgements which are created, the strictly feminine association it holds, tends to frame it as an appropriate form of peer management for girls. This is once again related to how interactions are structured in line with the specific gender goals that are linked to acceptable male and female identities; with 'traditional' men being

confrontational and direct, and 'traditional' women being discrete and compliant. Using digital resources which can inform private conversations aimed at subtly influencing the public perceptions of others, whilst maintaining civil relations through well maintained face work, aligns with these roles and norms. Therefore activities like gossip and stalking allow adolescent girls to manage their social status, and the status of those around them, whilst also conforming to the widely held gendered norms that are important within peer group. This brings us to a final examination of image-focused digital activities that are based around social ordering and relate to these gendered social norms.

### **Profile Pictures and Image Attention**

In most interviews, boys were less focused on producing their visual identity or how it could influence their social status. Their reticence to associate with this behaviour like girls did is part of the pursuit of the hegemonic masculinity that has been covered in **Chapter Five** (Frosh et al, 2001; Erikson, 1968). Conversely one of the ways in which female adolescents seek to place themselves within their peer group, in a manner that is acceptably feminine, is through the visual performance of self. Motivations which prompted frequent displays of visual self could be linked to traditional image pressures that coerce women into spending more time and effort on their outward appearance (Plinner, 1990; Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976; Langlois & Stephan, 1981; Sorell & Nowak, 1981). As beauty and style are values which are widely incorporated, in many cultures, as part of being female (Garfinkel & Garner, 1982; Plinner, 1990), openly discussing these goals and acknowledging them would likewise fit within acceptable gender norms. This is demonstrated in the following discussion where both Christine and Blake sum up the perceived gender differences in attitudes to visual images that are found online:

Interviewer- "Do you think girl's are more obsessed with their image?"

Blake- "Yeah, some people"

Christine- "Yeah they care more about what other people think. A lot of people do."

Interviewer- "Does that come across in how they use the platform?"

Christine- "Yeah, some people."

Interviewer- "What about boys?"

Christine- "Boys don't really care"

(Focus Group with Blake and Christine, Ref 7)

This extract sets out a typical definition of how either men or women are meant to value the attention and power that their personal image can create. As this relies on the judgements of others in relation to your own efforts, it is easy to see why traditional values of masculinity (which stipulate aloofness to the opinions of others) would encourage men to state their indifference. Conversely, the typical female values that err towards more group-based forms of interaction, and value the input from others, would suggest that there is a large and open recognition of how others perceive their performances. This has significant ramifications in the context of social networking sites.

On sites like Facebook and Instagram, the images that are shared online can be positively judged through the digital production of 'likes' or 'hearts' which are generated by other users clicking the appropriate symbols. The role that these symbols play in the construction of

forms of capital are explored in the following chapters, but here they are useful in highlighting how such actions can be part of subtle forms of social judgment and personal esteem. The two extracts below are examples of how sharing images on digital sites, and receiving positive affirmation of them, can result in boosts to that individual's social status:

Ana- "There's lots of apps that people use or something to get more likes"

Interviewer "What do you think, why do these likes make people popular?"

Sarah- "Because more people like your picture? I don't know."

(Laughter from the group)

Sarah- "You feel good when the people like it. (Chorus of group agreement) Your like, 'Yeah! I have likes'

(Focus Group with Ana and Sarah, Ref 10)

Here we witness Ana and Sarah discussing how sites like Facebook can be used to demonstrate popularity through accruing numbers that represent the attention that photos have received. For these girls, and nearly all the participants within this study, these likes were vital to their self esteem and happiness as it offered them a clear way to signify social position. Below, Valerie reports a similar sentiment but in the context of Snapchat:

Valerie- "You get points, don't ya, for how many people view your thing. I found out about it the other day. Looked at it was like...ah my points are a bit low...I don't care [laugh]. It's all about popularity and credibility. People do actually just sit there and go, I need to send another Snapchat. I need to send another Snapchat."

(Conversation with Valerie, Ref 11)

Both of these segments highlight collaborative efforts to manage an individual's social hierarchy within a group. By liking a photo, or ascribing points to a series of exchanges between friends, those involved receive the benefit of being able to show that they are both valued within their group and that others actively pay them attention. These two features are often important factors in how a person's overall popularity is constructed (Borch, 2010). Thus, acts of liking and gaining attention on photos could be argued to be inclusive. As performing these actions can bring people together through signalling attention and drawing notice to images or online posts, it suggests they are different to interactions like gossip, which deliberately exclude others. Both forms of behaviour can influence status through manipulating identity displays alongside relevant information, but once again we might note that gossip focuses on working at the background of social interaction whilst liking is much more direct in its appraisal of digital identities. Although there can be positive reactions generated from a virtual attention online, female participants were also keen to point out that it was just as easy to construct specific situations where others could be deliberately left out.

Indeed, one of the most interesting features of interactions between groups of all female teens was how openly controversial such displays of exclusion could be. In light of the argument above, this would seem to go against general social norms that dictate that female social ordering take place 'back-stage'. Below, Julie states how group membership can be invoked online in a visual manner and the consequences of this:

Julie: “For example in our year, like loads of people fell out and they started taking the mickey. You know you have a bio on Instagram, they started taking the mickey out of each other on that. And they write like ‘love heart’ with all their friends and they purposefully miss people out. It’s really horrible when that happens. If you get missed out, you are just like (she pulls a sad face) It’s just like ‘what’s happened?’

(Interview with Judie, Ref 6)

In this instance Julie describes the consequences of a group of female friends having a disagreement. By using the social networking site ‘Instagram’, individuals were able to display their allegiances to those who they supported within the argument. Instagram, unlike Facebook, is comprised solely of pictures uploaded by the user and provides only a small box in which the individual is able to define themselves; these brief descriptions of self act as both preface and clarification for the overall profile. Just as the images that are uploaded are usually deconstructed by other peers, here it was these descriptions that were analysed negatively. It is unclear whether these judgments took place publicly or in small gossip clusters, but this example support previous arguments that social networking sites offer key resources which can be drawn upon when critiquing the identities of others.

Judie states that specifically constructed posts can draw on the allegiances or conflicts that have been established, in a manner that is very public. In these examples, individuals produced a ‘love heart’ which included a list of names that the author proclaimed was



important. This is meant as a display of affection for those who are mentioned, but as Julie points out, can also be used to purposefully and negatively exclude others. In these events, it is the unclear nature of these communications which appeared to cause the most tension or stress for participants. Julie remarks that she feels both sad and confused when these events happen. The balance of social norms and perceived etiquette seems to prevent many female teenagers from openly asking why they were not included or responding to these actions directly. This might be because of fears that confrontation will lead to public displays of aggression (which we have seen are classed as non-feminine and acceptable only in extreme circumstance) or that they will be further excluded and incite more tension. This means that there is often a clouded sub-text which occurs amongst those who participate, where nothing is stated conclusively and an element of deniability (Collins and Solomos, 2010; Lee and Pinker, 2010) can be invoked (i.e. the author could easily claim to have simply forgotten to include that individual's name).

In view of the literature covered in this thesis, and how social behaviours like banter and gossip tend to structure themselves in accordance with accepted gender norms, this lack of directness could again be part of adhering to the standards of femininity that these girls value. Though it appears to cause them anxiety and unclear interactions, social strategies like these are in keeping with traditional ideas about women being non confrontational. The chance to explain the exclusion of key individuals as an oversight, allows civil displays of face to be maintained. As no one has openly derided another's character or their relationships, then there is no definitive action that can be taken; despite those involved often being aware that there is a deliberate subtext. As the 'Perfume Girls' point out, the perceived tendency of

many teenage girls is that their interactions will often utilise a civil front that masks a series of 'bitchy' exchanges:

Ives- "Because boys don't back chat about you. And girls just do"

Chanel- "And boys will confront you straight away, whereas a girl won't."

(Focus Group with Ives and Chanel, Ref 5)

However, these online actions are not as discrete as the acts of gossip that were noted earlier. These events take place on social networking sites, where a large audience can witness them. This means that there is an increased potential for social tension as individuals are aware that not only are those involved witnesses to these exclusions or inclusions, but potentially large unknown numbers of others can view them too. This prompts questions as to what the consequences of broadcasting these conflicts might be (a discussion which is explored in subsequent chapters).

### **Hot or Not, and Positive Commenting**

So far in this chapter, there has been evidence of adolescent girls' using social networking platforms as tools in the construction of social hierarchy. Extracts have demonstrated how inclusive and exclusive photos and stalking have all been used to negotiate social status. However there were also other ordering methods which were also reported. In a discussion that examined digital activities which individuals found distressing, two girls in the group raised the notion of a 'game' that appeared to hark back to the origins of Facebook itself; 'hot or not?' In later interviews with peers from the same environment, this was a common point

of controversy as it involved a very blunt and public dissection of identity performances within a set group. The following extract explores this phenomenon:

Ana: "The hot or not videos. Oh my god!"

Sarah: (Exasperated) "God!"

Interviewer: "What's a hot or not video?"

Ana: "Somebody like/"

Daniel: "When someone/"

Ana: "When somebody is like, 'Oh me and Ellie are having a sleep over. Uhm we are going to do a hot or not. And then like if you want to be in it.' Then people like, and they do a video and they go through all the names and they go hot or not."

Sarah: "It's kind of like offensive"

Interviewer: "Yeah it sounds like it!"

Ana: "I don't know why people get involved. I've never liked it."

Sarah: "I never like them!"

Ana: "No."

Sarah: "It's like people who like for rates and stuff. And someone get's a two or a three, and I think 'That's kind of harsh'"

Interviewer: "Do boys do that?"

Daniel: "Boys? No. No."

(Focus Group with Sarah, Anna and Dash, Ref 10)

For these girls 'hot or not?' refers to when girls in their peer group use social networking to publicly comment on the appearances of others, who have themselves signalled that they

wish to be included. Through using the broadcast setting on sites like Facebook or Instagram, which allow others to comment on posts, they can both gain the attention of other users and share judgments. As we have already noted, judging the shared visual performances of others is something that has been incorporated into many teenage interactions. However, 'hot or not?' is arguably the most candid example of subjective judgements which are expressed about other's identities. After hearing much about the 'back-handed' method of communication amongst many female adolescents, this public inclusion or exclusion seemed to be far more direct and prone to sparking open conflict. This practice appeared to sharply contrast against reported feminine ideas.

'Hot or not?' harks back to the origins of Facebook, where the site originally consisted of a series of photos of localized college students which could be rated by those who belonged to the same campus. This version titled 'Facemash', created by Mark Zuckerberg, was based on an actual web page called 'Hot or Not?' which ranked individuals from all over the internet. Though this current version is similar, the difference is that it is the choice of those within the peer network as to whether they would like to participate. This is an important distinction because it alters this process from merely being about subjective judgments provided by one person or group, into a system where once again social allegiances and status could be influenced or strengthened. Through participating in this game, individuals who have close bonds with the initiators are able to gain a measure of public recognition as to, not only the shared relationship between them, but also a validation of their social identity; if they receive a positive response. In short, choosing to play along with an event such as this amongst friends can offer the chance to openly receive and give image praise in a manner that can be witnessed by a large audience.

Of course the reaction that is provoked might not be entirely positive or beneficial. There is a chance that those who take part will instead receive negative feedback. Sarah notes that when this occurs she perceives it to be 'harsh', as we could likely concur that such ratings could radically impact both self-esteem and social status for that individual. The following chapters explore the value that teenagers place on public recognition through social networking, but currently it is worth emphasizing that the actual and believed consequences of a negative identity review like this, is a worrying concept for these participants. This prompts questions as to why some female teens would seem to choose to engage in this activity when there is a chance for such disastrous outcomes.

To answer this we have to explore another factor that featured in the production of identities using visual images; namely how some female users utilised system of positive support, which were not noted in male interactions. To clarify, this refers to the act of praise giving between female peers through publicly commenting on shared images:

Interviewer: "What do girls do on Facebook."

Juan- "Like they always say, they always post photos with girls and say 'Oh I love my best friend'. 'I love you'. Not always but sometimes//"

Paul- "//No always"

(Both laugh)

David- "Yeah but say, I posted a photo of me, or you posted a photo, I wouldn't say anything or they'd call me gay."

Juan- “Yeah like girls post loads of photos like that, but if it was me. I wouldn’t see the point putting you know, ‘Oh David, I like you’”

David –“Yeah you would just get called gay”

(Focus Group with David, Pablo and Juan, Ref 1)

In this example these boys report, arguably as part of another attempt to highlight a difference in gendered behaviour, how girls tend to be more collaborative in their comments. This was an attitude that was already encountered when we explored the role of banter in the last chapter, and at that point featured in arguments showing how female interaction tended to try and avoid open antagonism unlike many adolescent males. It was also reported that many boys felt they would be penalized for openly sharing feelings and emotions, as this contradicts the standards of masculinity within their culture. Thus sharing emotional comments with another individual is regarded as feminine. Although female participants never stated this behaviour was feminine, from the extracts in this chapter we can note that many of their responses do involve openly descriptive accounts of emotion. In these extracts the girls have no issue with revealing the emotional issues that some events have produced, or how they care for the attentions of their friends. Although boys are likely to also value their interpersonal relationships, it seems that prevailing gendered norms allow girls the opportunity to publicly express their affections and support; whilst these same norms prevent adolescent boys from engaging on an emotional level. The difference between how men and women are publicly allowed to express emotion without receiving derision, has resulted in either gender adapting suitable methods to negotiate how they structure social hierarchy.

Some might argue that, as this behaviour was not reported by female adolescents, this is simply another example of male teenagers attempting to display the power of masculine values through their control of emotions. This is a tactic that has been noted previously when boys draw upon the outward expression of emotion and link it to a weakness that is associated as part of being female. However, when we consider that many of the extracts above support the idea that girls tend to openly profess to being more supportive online, and pair it with the acts of civility (or public faces) that are key in successfully managing gossip and stalking, there is some validity to the claim that girls might be more emotional. However, rather than this being a sign of weakness, it is evident that public emotional expression is part of their social management strategies.

As these girls use social media as tool to manage relationships and cultivate an acceptable image, whilst also being consciously aware that there are common difficulties in gaining a positive audience and ensuring that profiles match with current norms, then the act of commenting on others posts could be an unspoken effort to create a form of positive safety net. Through publicly praising another in their efforts, there is the chance that when that individual offers a similar image up to be judged in conjunction with their social identity, it will also receive a positive reaction. This potential of reciprocation can answer why some girls will then also initiate and join in with open processes of judgment that are found in games like the 'Hot or not?'. Whilst gossip and visual exclusion methods can have a negative effect on someone's social status, positively critiquing visual displays in the face of the approved norms and showing how that they are acceptable can act as a counter measure. Therefore although openly remarking on a friend's photo, and proclaiming them 'beautiful,' displays social allegiance and relationships (Wolf, 2015) it can also create a resource upon which they

can draw, should they want to receive a similar boost later on. This doesn't mean that joining in with the game will ensure this outcome, but it does offer the chance to utilise social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) between users and reinforce personal bonds; not just between the users involved but also the online peer group.

As this takes place in a virtual 'public' setting, it also has further social consequences for those involved. Although participating and being ranked will actively influence both group status and identity integrity, it appears that regardless of the judgement that is passed, simply taking part or invoking the game can also have notable ramifications. An interesting point to note is that when it is discussed by Anna and Sarah, this activity is not met with a positive reaction. Instead it is something that is regarded with displeasure. Once again if we refer back to the exploration of gossip and stalking, which were activities pursued by a number of girls but were not favourably associated with, it appears that openly judging others is viewed as both controversial and distasteful. Although harsh and critical opinions of others are often formed as part of social interaction, once again it seems that a common trend amongst female adolescents is to publicly distance themselves and instead display an outward visage that aims to maintain social civilities (Wolf, 2015; McCormick, 2015). Some teenagers, who have perhaps experienced negative consequences when their identities or profiles have been widely judged (as Sarah suggests) might feel that these games can invoke similar negative opportunities that might not be worth risking. Even if they possess close social relationships which might yield positive comments. For these individuals, these games (and the people who take part) are likely viewed with disapproval because they openly associate with attempts to influence social perception and critique the identity performances of others.



Regardless of these attitudes, it is clear that these games are public strategies for social status management and, like gossip and stalking, use the identity performances of peers to stimulate social judgement. What is striking in these cases is that these opinions are shared publicly, in a manner that is very different to those formed in close knit gossip communications. Further studies on why these girls feel able to carry these activities out, without fear of being branded as masculine in their direct confrontations, would be useful in exploring this phenomena in greater depth and understanding it's relation to wider gender norms.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the role that gossip can play amongst teenagers in their negotiation of status and social identity production. This has led to an exploration of how these interactions can manifest online, and how both online and offline strategies appear to be linked (in both use and justification) to gendered social norms that inform what is appropriate feminine behaviour. Part of this discussion has included an introduction to the value of visual performances and how these are judged on sites like Facebook or Instagram. These images have been noted as playing pivotal roles in both stalking and gossip; with each of these methods of interaction seeking to both negotiate identity and group beliefs through passing shared judgements. Finally, other methods of social status management have been assessed and noted as featuring in 'games' which rely upon established social relationships and potentially preformed positive social capital; which can be used to display open demonstrations of popularity through acquiescing to approved standards of femininity and beauty.

Due to the challenges regarding respondent access (covered in Chapter Four), this project does veer towards a heavy male bias. To try and address this issue, unlike in other chapters of this thesis where examples have been very selective, the extracts here draw upon responses from all the female participants within this study. By providing as many responses, from as broad a range as possible, the author hopes to demonstrate the shared key themes that were revealed across the range of age and classes sampled. Indeed, much like the banter work in the previous section, the role and use of gossip as a social process was critical in all of these individuals social experiences (both offline and on). Furthermore, within the 'safe' confines of the confidential interview and focus group space, many girls took the chance to openly talk about a topic that they often felt was taboo or frowned upon (this was despite the presence of a male interviewer). Perhaps by doing so, especially within the all girl focus groups, we can see further evidence of gossip being used, within the actual context of discussing gossip, to explore the social world, build interpersonal bonds and define a gendered identity. This is evident within the mix of participants that are included (for greater contextual detail regarding each session and participant, please see appendix). For the perfume girls, a group of girls who were all cousins, Islamic, and hailed from a lower-class background, speaking to the male interviewer in a home setting seemed to provide them with a novel way of exploring everyday activities and gendered ideas. This led to open and frank discussions that were not always as easy to replicate in other sessions that took place within a school setting amongst participants who did not share close family bonds. However, it was the individuals from more middle and upper class backgrounds who were prone to framing gossip (and exploring it further) within a digital setting. For these teens, unlike the perfume girls, the two activities were heavily intertwined and supplemented each other. Although this difference is

slight, and potentially not representative of a wider phenomenon, it does prompt the question whether class and the ability to access digital spaces (i.e. overcoming the barriers of data cost and hardware accessibility) will influence how these girls use and pursue gossip in conjunction with online and offline environments. For example, for those who are not as able to engage as frequently, are they more or less successful at navigating the gossip challenges laid out in the chapter, and does this in some way affect their social capital or perceived social class?

Furthermore, the girl's perceptions of male behaviour was noticeably different during sessions conducted within home environments versus educational institutions. In home interviews, like those with the Perfume Girls and Valerie, the girls tended towards expressing stereotypical opinions of male and female behaviours (i.e. boys were always open and confrontational, whilst girls were more covert and 'bitchy'). However, those girls sampled from the academy (which was a mixed gendered school) stated that boys tended towards very similar behaviours as girls, even though many of them would deny such behaviour. This variation might suggest that the girls who are always around male peers are more likely to recognise a lack of supposed gender differences. Or, as each set of girls attended a very different set of schools in varying socio-economic areas (Rougard Academy sampled from a wealthy background unlike the Perfume Girls school which was styled as a local comprehensive), we might surmise that gendered ideals and their reproduction are heavily tied to class factors. Again, the work in this thesis does not provide conclusive evidence of how an environment (be it the school setting, or the construction of the interview/focus group itself in relation to a male interviewer) leads to gender productions, but it does indicate that there are some casual factors which have resulted in these differences.

The next chapter will examine how social networks facilitate performances of self by enabling the production of profiles which are created in accordance with the social norms that have been established in previous chapters. The introduction of these technologies has influenced the manner in which teenagers can generate and access social capital in a digital context. This has resulted in the creation of 'virtual' capital and the 'Like' generation.

## **Chapter Seven: Adolescents' Use of Facebook - Disengagement and Disillusionment**

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins by exploring how Facebook was perceived by adolescents within this study. It explores the contradictory responses received during research, which indicate a sense of attraction and irritation towards Facebook. Data gathered from both quantitative and qualitative methods are used alongside recent literature to explore current attitudes. Whilst many individuals reported Facebook to be the most used digital site, discussions during interviews and focus groups provided a very different answer. In qualitative sessions, the majority of teens stated categorically that they disliked Facebook and that they attempted to distance themselves from it. This discussion introduces and contextualises the argument that many adolescent users are turning away from Facebook and focusing their attentions upon newer platforms, and begins to explain why this transition is happening.

The first part of this investigation (and this chapter) involves exploring Facebook's 'like' system. It notes how these virtual symbols has become widely adopted, by both male and female teens, as an indicator of status. It analyses the influence this has on social relationships and identity performances. It reveals how social norms regarding 'likes' play a crucial part in why many teenagers expressed a disinterest in Facebook, yet seemed unable to break away from it. This complex relationship has produced the 'Like' Generation.

### **Facebook: Apathy or Attraction?**

From both qualitative and quantitative data, it became apparent that Facebook was a key element in teenage communication and that it was still used by the majority of participants. Previous chapters have already noted how it can be used to manage social status through displaying gendered performances. Though using these technologies to enact gossip, banter and approved visual presentations, adolescents are able to negotiate concepts of masculinity or femininity amongst their peer group. One of the reasons as to why Facebook is so popular is because it allows teenagers to carefully construct, and edit, their identities at any given point. These affordances can incite people to log on and allow Facebook to retain its large user base. When asked about the site, teenagers admitted that it was a dominant platform:

Andy: "Facebook's, probably like number one because..."

Valerie: "Everybody uses it"

(Extracts from Interviews with Andy and Valerie, Ref 11)

From data gathered in 85 surveys, a similar picture emerged. An original survey was created which sought to explore how Facebook ranked against other current social networking sites. The first question required participants to rank their favourite site between one and five; one denoting the most popular and five the least (see Table 1). The options that were available were Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp and Other. Another question, which used the same format, required participants to state which site they spent the most time using (see Table 2).

In some cases, the teens were unable to conclusively decide between the options provided and would assign the same numbers to different platforms (e.g. Whatsapp, Instagram and Snapchat would all receive a 1 rating). Rather than regarding these as erroneous or separate categories, they were divided appropriately and assigned to the larger groups they belong to. For example, if four people allocated Facebook and Snapchat as their first favourite, then the percentage response of these four would be halved and added to the responses that cited just Facebook and Snapchat. This allows for a simple comparison without editing the feedback in a way that could be said to skew the results, as each site is accorded an equal weighting from that survey and that participant. Each ranking, from 1-5 was then formulated into a table that demonstrated which percentage the platform had received for that preference. This means that for the following two questions, five tables for each preference were generated.

Cumulative percentages were then calculated by combining all the percentages in each ranking (1-5) for all platforms. By using the percentages of platforms in both their best and worst rankings, we are able to see how often they have been cited overall. This allows the outcome to be balanced by not only those individuals who have favoured that site, but also incorporates others who had not been so positive. Those sites which are reported more favourably can likely be expected to appear less in later rankings, whilst conversely less popular sites will feature more heavily in the lower choices. This system of averaging avoids selective bias and indicates trends within the sample population over the entire spectrum of selected choices.

For ease of use, the following tables highlight which order the SNS were placed for the first preference and the total cumulative percentages from all preferences. The table below displays the results for the ‘Most Preferred’ Social Networking Site:

**Table 1: Most Popular Social Networking Site**

	<i>First Allocated Preferences</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage from ALL Preferences</i>
<i>Platform</i>		
<b>Facebook:</b>	23.9	67.2
<b>Instagram:</b>	15.5	67.6
<b>Whatsapp:</b>	17.1	63.4
<b>Snapchat:</b>	17.3	68.6
<b>Twitter:</b>	9.7	60.9
<b>Other:</b>	5.9	11.3
<b>Missing:</b>	10.6	160

If we examine the figures in the first preference column, Facebook was ranked first with Snapchat and Whatsapp coming a very close second and third. This mirrors responses in qualitative sessions which indicated that Facebook’s was still used frequently. However, it is important to also consider the cumulative percentages from all the ranked options. In the cumulative column there is far less disparity between platforms. Here we witness only minor deviations in popularity between Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Whatsapp and



Twitter. This means that whilst many individuals chose to place Facebook as initially popular in the first column, over subsequent rankings and surveys, each platform received very similar outcomes. This is a theme that was also present from data exploring how often a platform was used:

**Table 2: Platform Used for the Longest Period of Time**

	<i>First Allocated Preferences</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage from ALL Preferences</i>
<i>Platform</i>		
<b>Facebook:</b>	26.1	62.1
<b>Instagram:</b>	15.5	61
<b>Whatsapp:</b>	19.1	46.6
<b>Snapchat:</b>	8.4	63
<b>Twitter:</b>	14.3	55
<b>Other:</b>	6	10.2
<b>Missing:</b>	10.6	202.1

For the first preference Facebook is again top, followed by Whatsapp and then closely by Instagram and Twitter. Interestingly, although Snapchat performs poorly as an initial preference, in the cumulative rankings it places highest by a fraction. The opposite is true for Whatsapp. However again there is ultimately very little difference between Facebook,

Instagram and Snapchat; though both Whatsapp and Twitter feature some distance behind.

These figures support the argument that Facebook is still a dominant force in the social media landscape for these adolescents. The data indicates that many adolescents tend to draw fairly closely on a range of platforms, with minimal differences in usage (according to the statistics) or popularity. This is especially pertinent when we consider that many teens were unable to make concrete selections as to which platform was their favourite or most used; thus requiring the author to complete the process outlined above, in order to make any sense of the quantitative data. For these adolescents it is perhaps unthinkable to separate out their daily interactions into single streams of communication. Instead it is plausible that they prefer to think of their interactions as processes which draw upon any, and all available resources which might be the most effective. This is an argument that this thesis will come back to later on in the final chapter.

These statistics therefore tend to suggest that Facebook is an integral and accepted part of adolescent communication. However, contemporary literature and qualitative responses in this study suggests this is not quite the case. Recent figures in other studies reveal that young teens are moving away onto other services. In a sequence of events that mimics how its predecessor MySpace lost its users (Robards, 2012), Facebook has reported seeing a loss in daily user ship amongst teens in 'core demographics' like the USA and England (Constine, 2013). Meanwhile, Snapchat, a relatively new social tool, has announced "that it sees 350 million "snaps" (photos and videos) sent per day. That's equal to the number of photos uploaded to Facebook per day." (Constine, 2013). These

statistics, released most notably in a PEW research paper (Madden et al, 2013) and spread through sites like the Huffington Post (Bosker, 2013a), gave rise to the view that enthusiasm for Facebook was on the wane worldwide. Subsequent work by academics, like Danny Miller, argued that Facebook was not on its way out of the technological spotlight, but was in fact already 'dead and buried'. Through interviews with children aged 11 to 18, he surmised that many adolescents shun the site due to the steady increase of adult relatives who have intruded onto Facebook. His paper, and the ensuing controversy that followed as others sought to criticise his work, were reported across various media outlets. (Miller, 2011). More recent articles have been quick to address these perceptions, revealing that although the numbers of daily website users have decreased, Facebook is still highly popular in a smart phone format (Bosker, 2013b). Yet what is consistent between these articles, and their research, is that teenagers are becomingly increasingly disillusioned with the social networking site:

While some of our teen focus group participants reported positive feelings about their use of Facebook, many spoke negatively about an increasing adult presence, the high stakes of managing self-presentation on the site, the burden of negative social interactions ("drama"), or feeling overwhelmed by friends who share too much. (Madden, 2013)

In this project, responses which discussed Facebook were often followed with expressions of disinterest in the everyday content of the site. Below are brief examples of these typical reactions. These extracts reveal a sense that the teenagers in this study felt that Facebook had outgrown its appeal. Mark, when asked about any changes in the time he

had spent on the site, reported that he would initially be logged on for hours chatting and sharing with his friends. Whereas now:

“It’s not that good anymore...people have changed and it’s...just different. Boring.”

(Interview with Mark, Ref 12)

Similarly, Saab stated that his current rate of use was far lower than when he had initially created a profile. This was because of an overall decline in use amongst his peers:

“Everyone got it in year ten and it was quite exciting...but now its quite boring...I used to go on it every day normally...but now...one a week sometimes”

(Interview with Saab, Ref 8)

Finally, Valerie’s answer below epitomises the apathy towards Facebook that arose in interviews, all contributing to the researcher concluding that some teens have grown tired with the platform:

“Sometimes it actually does quite upset me, as people put all sorts of stuff on that can affect you without them meaning to...and you’re just looking through it and changes your mood...cos you’re so into it.”

(Interview with Valerie, Ref 11)

These interviews, along with work by Robards (2012), suggest a conflicting duality that has emerged amongst adolescents online, as they feel both irritated and drawn into the digitally socialized world that Facebook provides. These responses, taken alongside the work that has already been set out in the chapters exploring gender, suggest that some adolescents feel compelled to use Facebook despite wishing that they didn't have to. The possibilities it offers in terms of social connection and structure are both appealing and distressing in equal measure. In one interview with King, an individual who vehemently expressed a dislike of Facebook, when asked why he hadn't deleted his profile he replied:

“When you're not logged onto Facebook, you just feel like you're missing out. It's like you're asleep at a party. It's kind of like that.”

(Interview with Lionheart, Ref 4)

Worries about 'missing out' on social events or remaining uninformed were reported frequently throughout qualitative research sessions. Whilst initially it seemed to the researcher that this was because of individuals simply wishing to be kept 'in the loop' on their friend's activities, it became apparent that there were further underlying reasons. Keeping abreast of current trends and cultural information directly influenced the user's representation of self online, which would in turn affect their ability to generate 'likes'. One of the most crucial elements of the Facebook experience, for most of the adolescents in this study, was the production and role of 'likes'. It is this aspect, which forms the first of a series of arguments, that explores why adolescents are increasingly marginalising Facebook in their digital social communications.

### **It's 'Like' Popularity**

One of the most popular and well-noted features of sites like Facebook and Instagram, is the ability to display a 'like' on everything that is posted online. Through the click of a button, individuals are able to demonstrate their approval on photos, comments, stories and a plethora of other virtual behaviours. Despite perhaps being originally implemented as a way to signal affection, for many teenagers, 'likes' are an integral part of accruing and displaying status (Sherman, 2016). Chanel and Dior reveal that the popularity that is generated online, can often affect the status and image an individual has in the offline world:

Chanel- "Yeah it's really pathetic and, you know how you make friends in real life and you're popular like that? Well if you have loads of friends on Instagram and Facebook, you're like socially popular and then people have arguments about that. The more likes you get, the more of a better person you are."

Dior- "Yeah, it's like, if you don't have enough likes then you're so not cool and no one will like you. It's so stupid"

(Focus Group with 'Perfume Girls', age Ref 5)

For these girls there is a large emotional element which is attached to the creation of likes online. Their responses reveal that digital approval is closely linked to how some teenager's judge individual character. These statements indicate that likes act as a visual marker of how valued a user is within their peer community. The emotion evident in how they view this dynamic, regardless of their negative perception toward it, suggest that they are still influenced by it (Sherman, 2016). The derision they demonstrate is

stereotypical of many adolescents who disparaged this system but still appeared to be affected by its ability to impact their public presentations of self. This is further evidenced by Toffy who states that:

“Likes are extremely important on Facebook. If you don’t get likes, you’re nothing”

(Interview with Toffy, Ref 13)

Again we witness the same sentiment which links digital displays of affection with both self-esteem and public value. In a traditional adolescent setting (e.g. the classroom or playground) before the addition of SNS, popularity would be produced through physical and verbal displays of capital and status. For example, by following brands, wearing specific clothes, or through affiliating to other trends that signified positive capital, such as music and sport. These factors are still important in creating cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) amongst the younger generation because they share a similar symbolic value which corresponds to ideas in the adult world. Though hobbies and interests may still act as social indicators, social networking has altered how popularity is derived from simply associating with these interests. Where once it might have been enough to show that you knew about a subject (or were a ‘fan’), because ‘likes’ allow an individual to show their impact upon a group, status is proved through posting online and gathering a display of how many others notice your actions. The simple action of clicking ‘like’ can portray a digital showing of rank that is further supported as more users engage. Below, Nathan and Carly explain the process in further detail:

Interviewer- “You say it’s like a competition?”

Nathan- "Well in a way I suppose yeah. Not like. Well, it's...who get's most likes. You want as many likes as possible."

Interviewer- "Does that, ah, does that come offline? If people have got a lot of likes, what does that do in your environment at school?"

Carly- "You just think that they're...I don't really know. [Tentatively] It doesn't really make them more popular..."

Interviewer- "You say it isn't really like they're popular, but the way you say it tends to suggest..."

Carly- "Yeah. Well they...the more likes you get, the better you think the photo is, so you could say that it makes them feel more popular."

Freya- "Makes you feel better about yourself. If people like it because you're like 'Oh, that's kind of nice that someone has liked my photo.'"

(Focus Group with Nathan, Carly and Freya, Ref 14)

In this extract we again encounter the perception that receiving likes online translates into a positive feeling of acceptance within a peer group. Whilst Carly initially states that there is not a correlation between likes and popularity, when prompted she notes that regardless of whether receiving likes does make you popular, it encourages the user to believe that they are. From these assembled extracts we can note that these virtual displays of approval are a key factor in how these teens envisage self-esteem and social worth. Fitting into a community and being liked are concerns which have noted as prominent aspects of adolescent development and relationships within traditional literature (McGurk, 1992; Fine, 1981; Byrne, 1971). This could explain why many individuals use these platforms because, for them, it is a crucial tool to both craft their



identity, and prove their acceptance within a group. However, this still does not tell us how likes work or how they are procured. This leads us to an examination of how an individual achieves likes. Some of the extracts above have already indicated that there is a relationship between receiving peer attention and offline popularity. As we will now see, an individual's ability to produce likes is directly influenced by their mastery of social norms, which in turn affects their levels of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

### **That's What I 'Like'!**

During the course of the project teenagers reported posting many different types of digital objects in order to receive likes. This included photos of themselves, friends, pets, carefully worded posts on both serious and comical topics, and more recently, short videos called 'vines'. Each of these actions attempted to provide something that was worth being seen and noticed by their friends, and which might stimulate a positive response. Receiving likes would not only validate their efforts but also their place within the peer network.

The exact content of some of these posts, and how they fit within specific normative and social values, relates to the work covered in previous chapters. These discussions explored how users would represent traditional values of masculinity or femininity online. For boys this included drawing upon images that would highlight their dominance, or imply a weakness amongst friends, within the context of typical masculine traits; like strength or sexual prowess. Through tagging friends in these displays and accruing likes, teens can achieve a number of outcomes. They are able to negotiate gendered identities, show allegiance to a prevailing cultural norm (Sherman, 2016) and crucially gather an

audience. This last element simultaneously supports all of the previous goals because it provides the user with an environment in which to perform and show that they are valued within that group. Female teens relied on the same dynamics when using social networks to draw on interpersonal relationships and create images that negotiated conventional beauty standards. If users can produce a profile that is in keeping with a vast majority of culturally approved norms, and do so through drawing upon popular relationships within a group, then they are able to capture a large amount of positive social attention.

Likes serve as indicators of an individual's ability to manage their posts, and identity, in relation to the demands of those around them (Cooley, 1902). A successful profile, which displays value to the community through interesting links and posts, is likely to receive far more likes than a profile that breaks with social norms or etiquettes. Teenagers who were active online were very keen to ensure that their profiles would produce the most amount of positive attention that was possible and thus positively affect their image. As noted above, this concern mirrors the traditional pressures of wanting to be popular offline, pre-social networking.

This raises an interesting point, which Chanel and Dior have already noted in a previous extract. If an individual is well versed in negotiating group norms and creating strong bonds amongst their community, it is likely that they will be similarly successful at doing so online. This means that they are also more likely to receive likes and re-enforce their sense of popularity online as well as offline:

Chanel: “Yeah it’s really pathetic and, you know how you make friends in real life and you’re popular like that? Well if you have loads of friends on Instagram and Facebook, you’re like socially popular and then people have arguments about that. The more likes you get, the more of a better person you are.”

(Focus Group with ‘Perfume Girls’, Ref 5)

Chanel was not the only teen to openly analysis this dynamic. In another focus group, with a teenage boy named Geoff, the same sentiment was encountered:

“Yeah. But, like...when people are popular on Facebook, Facebook will like make them stay popular and people that aren’t that popular...will stay not popular”.

(Interview with Geoff, Ref 15)

Here Geoff reveals that the creation of ‘likes’ is linked in some way to the ties of social capital which are already present within the individuals relationship sphere. His perception is that those who are already popular will be able to capitalise on these relationships, and achieve a high level of public approval that will further cement their status. Whilst conversely, those without ‘popular’ friends will be unable to achieve the same affect. This has interesting implications for the role of social capital within digital communication, especially when we consider the exclusionary aspect that appears to be apparent within the production of likes and the establishment of popularity.

Sites like Facebook are quick to offer people the chance to ‘like’ a musician, or create a group about their hobbies and favourite celebrities, placing it (and its members) in a

public arena for all to see. This could allow individuals to demonstrate that they share common interests with individuals who are perceived to be more popular. Using shared interests as evidence of mutual compatibility, individuals can attempt to endear themselves to these adolescents through purposefully posting content they believe will be well received. Should this strategy be successful then 'popular' peers might 'like' these posts and boost the esteem and public image of the user. In Putnam's terms, this could be classified as an example of 'bridging capital' (Putnam, 2000). In initial explorations of social networking, Putnam is often featured as academics espouse the potential benefits of these platforms in linking up disparate parts of the social community.

Putnam explored the effect that interpersonal relations amongst differing groups have on communities, famously in the context of bowling alleys within America. (Putnam, 2000). When individuals interact with others to form factions, they produce social capital. Putnam defines this capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993, 167)" He believes that social capital can enhance communication between individuals and that it is beneficial for society as a whole. "In other words...[it] enables people to collaborate, socialize, establish communities and live together." (Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2009, 6)

As people talk to other individuals, even at a 'grass-roots' level, bonds of trust and coordination are produced. It is easy to see how Facebook, with its drive to link people together, could be placed in the parameters of Putnam's ideas for creating ties. As the friends that these adolescents desire to interact with are arguably outside of their

immediate friendship group, then they must correspond in a way that fosters appropriate links; through creating 'bridging capital': "Bridging social capital identifies networks that bridge social divides and promote heterogeneity in groups and societies... it smoothes relations between groups and individuals" (Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2009, 8). Putnam states that is the hardest form of social capital to successfully form, but that it is vital for a healthy and diverse community. Therefore, we could argue that social networking has the potential for individuals to reach out to those deemed to be more 'valued' within a group. Through appropriately managing their digital identity, and displaying a sense of self that is in keeping with shared values, they might be able to forge personal bonds through receiving likes and initiating a dialogue.

However, despite the potential opportunities that social networks offer within the context of bonding disparate groups, this study and other works (Julien, 2014) reveal that these platforms are more prone to exclusion than inclusion. This has already been demonstrated in previous chapters where social networks have been used to enforce social boundaries and exclude selected peers. These findings tend to suggest that the work of Putnam is no longer relevant when exploring contemporary digital practices. Instead, as we will now see, some academics (myself included) tend to favour the theories of social capital that Bourdieu uses.

In **Chapter Six** we discussed how female teens created public posts which symbolised their friendship ties, deliberately not involving some members who had been excluded. Acts of exclusion were often related to negative judgements that a group passed on an individual's actions and behaviours. These practices worked on the basis of shared

understandings of current interpersonal ties, personal histories and cultural notions. These shared images were part of an attempt to manipulate social ties and draw upon, or change, existing interpersonal bonds. There are notable parallels between this work and a study on memes by Julien:

Because digital inhabitants derive part of their total stake of social capital online, they are invested in online relations and are not 'indifferent' to making distinguishing judgments about what will indicate membership in the digital, online community. (Julien, 2014, 367)

In his work he states that specific social knowledge is required to successfully manipulate these pictures and employ them. As we can see from the responses in this study, for an individual to gain digital approval, they must also possess (and be able to demonstrate) this specific social knowledge. This draws upon both their ability to adhere to contemporary values within a group, and utilise the interpersonal bonds that they have access to. Likes can symbolise accepted cultural ideas, valued individuals and group membership.

However, if an individual is unable to meet these standards then they will be unable to gather the attention they desire. For most users the positive attention they receive online will be dependant upon the offline bonds that they have (Steinfeld et al, 2008) and their already available levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This is of course dependant upon their ability to master and conform to approved social norms (and demonstrate that they can do so). It is this element of the dynamic which leads to the sentiments expressed

by Geoff and Chanel. Those who are already popular are able to negotiate these rules and use them to their advantage, both in digital form and offline. Thus these teens are able to gather the much desired likes and reinforce their status through the visual displays that likes provide. Conversely, teenagers who are not as able to negotiate the values of their group, perhaps due to economic reasons or a lack of ability, will not be able to hold the favour of their peer group in the same way. This leads to cyclical aspect of likes producing status, and status producing likes, which can be witnessed in many of the accounts in this chapter.

### **The Like Lottery**

Likes were so valued by adolescents that they had the potential to allow for a total re-invention of social status. Due to the speed in which information can be accessed, shared and edited in the digital age, an individuals place within their peer group can in fact be swiftly altered if they are able to gain the visible attention of a widespread digital audience and prove it. Lionheart reports a friend who had experienced a fast rise in popularity amongst his peers, granted through Facebook and the 'likes' he had received from others:

Lionheart: "He was a promoter for a bit for a clothing company, he had this thing where he had four thousand likes"

Interviewer: "And from what you've said, this made him popular?"

Lionheart: "Yeah. Yeah that was the bit where he did a few promoting things...[awed tone] got quite a few likes"

(Interview with Lionheart, Ref 4)

In this extract Lionheart describes a peer that managed to thoroughly capture the attention of not only his immediate peer group, but a larger audience too. Through posting events on Facebook, which were associated with a popular clothing brand, others had signalled their approval and interest via the like button. The large volume of likes he had received, transformed his public status as others noticed that he was the focus of attention and thus in turn chose to focus upon him. Through drawing upon the already available popularity of the brand, and associating with this, the boy in question had managed to shift how his peer group perceived him. The groups open acknowledgment, which also included likes from those in the wider community, worked to identify him as a valuable group member and also perhaps as an individual who might be able to boost their own social credibility; should they be able to successfully associate with him as well. During the interview King remarked how a few posts had turned him from 'normal' to 'a bit of a celebrity'.

If this situation is indicative of how influential likes can be amongst certain peer groups, it is little wonder as to why many adolescents feel compelled to use platforms where they are able to both edit public identities and gain attention. If this attention translates so directly into status and self esteem, then likes are a very valuable and important currency for many adolescents. However, although this technology might allow an individual to rise quickly in the estimations of their group, it seems that this popularity can disappear just as quickly.



### **“What Goes Up Must Come Down” and Conclusion**

In many interviews, participants revealed instances where social networking had been used to deride an individual and their status. On these occasions, instead of likes, it was comments or ‘shares’ which were used to publicly judge actions deemed socially inappropriate. Lionheart revealed that the very same promoter, who had effectively used social networking for positive gain, was soon under attack because of an identity slip on Facebook:

Lionheart: “I didn’t talk to him for a while. All my friends were being really mean to him about something, when I asked what it was...he had like put make-up on for a photo. Like. Blusher or something. Everyone was properly being mean to him. He was like stop it”

Interviewer: [referring to the photo] “So he put that up himself?”

Lionheart: “Uhm. No they found blusher. And then you zoomed into the photo...and there was a bit of smear. We were like why did you do that?”

(Interview with Lionheart, Ref 4)

This extract suggests that the approval generated online can be as fickle as it is influential. Despite receiving large amounts of positive attention, the teenage boy in question faced intense criticism from the same peers which had lauded him. The production of likes can be useful in displaying how valued a user is to a specific group, and their prowess at navigating approved social norms. However, alongside these likes comes the increased attention that marks the user out as someone to watch. From the responses above we can see that this can create complications if the user does not consistently provide an

acceptable public image. In this example the young lad was found to be using a feminine beauty product; perhaps to try and improve his pallor online and display a beauty aesthetic in keeping with cultural demands (i.e. tanned and healthy). Unfortunately, a close examination of public photos revealed the use of this product. This photo displayed contradictory identity information. Whilst the boy was attempting to perform a masculine role, his association with an object that is judged as feminine means that his peers regarded him and his behaviour negatively. Regardless of whether he was indeed using blusher, or if other male peers engage in the same activity, the subsequent outcry resulted in him becoming a figure of public ridicule.

The close scrutiny of individuals online, be it their actions or identity portrayals, and the detrimental effects of a misplaced upload, appear to contribute to the pressure that young adolescents experience when logged into Facebook. The addition of a 'timeline' feature in the past few years makes this a further problem, as past representations of self can now be judged against the current 'face' (Goffman, 1959; Tracy, 2002) and used to undermine status. (This relates to information management online, which is discussed in the next section).

These examples highlight how social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) has become a digitally quantifiable and crucial part of adolescent's social experiences. If these users successfully navigate the same process through which social capital is established offline (through openly adhering to group norms, strengthening interpersonal bonds and displaying their worth within a group) they are now able to visibly display their social influence. This dynamic adds another element of complexity Erikson's theory of identity production

during the adolescent phase (covered in **Chapter Two**). In the 'traditional' (pre-sns) teenage development phase, many individuals are preoccupied with gaining the recognition and respect of their peers, and use their estimations to measure and forge their sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Whilst there are clear similarities between the teenagers that Erikson writes about, and those included in this study, the introduction of digital social networks has altered how this recognition is generated, identified and deployed within social settings.

This thesis argues that 'likes' (and other virtual symbols) now act as tangible proof of personal relationships and the bonds that link them together; bonds which often draw upon social values. Likes have thus become a 'virtual capital' that can both improve, and demonstrate, a user's status both online and off. The value of these 'thumbs up' is not only in their ability to act as proof of acceptance, but also as a declaration to others that you are worth paying attention to. It is no longer perhaps a statement of 'Look at how approved I am', but instead 'Look at **how many** people approve and notice me'.

Despite cultural, class, gender and educational differences, likes were a key part of the contemporary teenage experience within each community that was studied. As we explore the other elements of this thesis, which all bear some relation towards the production of identity and favourable virtual capital, it is worth keeping this importance in mind for two reasons. First, it is indicative of the perceived influence that these digital environments have within adolescent circles. Second, to assess if there are any long term differences between 'traditional' identity development, and the manner in which identity is produced and experienced by teens today, we need to understand whether these

digital influences have altered the likelihood of contemporary teenagers being able to successfully negotiate and resolve the adolescent phase (Erikson, 1968). Do social networking sites influence the resolution of conflicts which are necessary to achieve systemic outcomes, which may later contribute to a 'whole' identity? This question will be explored within the following chapters.

To conclude, likes form part of a tangible virtual capital that can be used to clearly demonstrate a user's popularity, their perceived value, their ability to negotiate group norms, and importantly the social relationships that they can draw from. However, whilst likes are valuable to these teens, and feature as prominent motivation in the continued use of social platforms, they are not without their downfalls. Receiving an increased attention also means receiving an increased critique. If the user is unable to present an approved digital face, and reveals inaccuracies or contradictions, then they are liable to face damaging social consequences (Goffman, 1959, 1983). Therefore, alongside attempting to produce posts which will gather attention, the user must always be on their guard when engaging online, lest they make a mistake and reveal undesirable information. This neatly brings us to a discussion of information management and its role in the construction of a virtual identity and status.

## **Chapter Eight: Information Miss-management, Control and Sharing Online**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores adolescents' concerns regarding how information could, or rather could not be controlled via Facebook. For many teens, social networks provide an opportunity to continually shape their digital identities. It is therefore important to ensure that what is posted online is managed in the most effective way possible. Ill-timed posts which offer conflicting information, not only about the user's display of 'self' but also the perceptions that are held by others, can create dramatic social repercussions (Goffman, 1959). These are lessons which have been learnt, in some form or another, by everyone who uses social networking. However, when discussing teenagers and the future ramifications their offline and online experiences might have, we have to explore whether age plays a factor in their experiences. This section will examine these issues and build upon previous arguments in order to highlight the growing angst amongst 13-17 year-old Facebook users.

### **Information Control**

A recurring theme noted during discussions of information control related to understandings of the fluid, and at times contradictory nature, of digital content creation. Many individuals reported being perplexed at how others might be able to access or interpret what they posted. The line between what was seen to be either private or public, was a divide that many users found difficult to rationalise. Participants in this study could name a number of friends who had created tension or discomfort in their

lives, by revealing information online which should have been kept private from parents, peers and work colleagues (see also Turkle, 2011; Emerson, 2011).

In order to examine how issues can arise over the sharing of information, Petronio's theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) is useful in distinguishing the process into three dimensions: privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence (Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2011). The first of these terms describes when users exchange private data. Through posting or sharing something online, in an arena where they do not have the tools to control who might see that data, the user offers future control and management over said information, in conjunction with their own rights. Once that information is removed from a private space and is released into public setting, it becomes something that is shared amongst a group setting with all parties involved becoming authorized co-owners (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio & Gaff, 2010). This leads to the negotiation of privacy ownership by the individual, as the information is released into the collective group. Problems arise when users do not recognise that their profile page is not, as some might believe, a private space; rather it is a part of a much larger collectively managed group. Pearson uses the metaphor of the 'glass bedroom' to denote a space that "is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language" (Pearson, 2006). Some displays of information or 'self' are performed with the majority of others in mind; conforming to those collective norms or seeking to build the bonds which might offer them a chance to influence their virtual and social capital. Attempts to negotiate these concepts, or try and direct the attention away (or to) this information falls under the second term of 'privacy control'.

Certain posts or activities might be intended for only a select few with the thought of a larger audience viewing never under consideration. These behaviours might not be edited in a way that ensures the originally intended privacy and are instead broadcast to a larger audience. When individuals who were not meant to be privy to these exchanges remark upon them, conflicts can occur. “Indeed, the original performers may express outrage, surprise, or dismay that some information becomes ‘public’ — that is, what they perceive to be an intimate exchange was observed by an ‘outsider” (Pearson, 2006). Any event where control and ownership is contested or unsuccessful (i.e. when it cannot be in being redefined by the original user) is thus classed as ‘privacy turbulence’. At this juncture it is worth re-visiting two previous examples, and evaluating them within the context of information control.

### **Privacy Control, Turbulence and Identity Inconsistency**

The first extract below concerns Saab and his sister’s conflict. This is a key example of the difficulty that is present when trying to control the flow of information via Facebook:

Interviewer- “Have you had any experience of that, what was said online, has happened offline? A bit of what he said and she said going on?”

Saab- “Yeah but most of the time if they say something they will always, if they are friends with the person who they are saying stuff about the will always block the post from them, so they can’t see it.”

Interviewer- “I didn’t know you could do that.”

Saab- “I don’t know how to do it as well, but my sister, she did it with this person that she didn’t really like, so she did it with her.”

Interviewer- "Right okay"

Saab- "Its cos they were like enemies at that point. Sworn enemies."

Interviewer- "Do you know if she found out eventually what was said on Facebook?"

Saab- "Yeah they are bound too, as there is always that one person they didn't block who will find out and tell her."

Interviewer- "So do you think that makes it more difficult to manage? You know what you say?"

Saab- "Yeah"

Interviewer- "Now than it used to have been before?"

Saab- "Yeah"

(Interview with Saab, Ref 8)

In this extract we witness a conflict that has stemmed from comments initially shared between friends online. Saab's sister, who was 11 years old at the time of the interview, had been engaged in a number of altercations with another girl at her school. These interactions had led her to discuss her feelings about the girl online, with her close friends, through various wall posts or deliberately ambiguous, yet provocative comments. Whilst these statements remained ambiguous and private, the only social repercussions were those associated with gossiping. (See **Chapter Seven** for further discussion of this). Saab notes that his sister was keenly aware of the fall out that might occur were her thoughts to have become public. To prevent this, she had consciously chosen to block members of the opposing female group from being able to see her activities. This typifies how users try to create privacy control, as her actions aimed to limit the information



shared between either girl. However, despite these steps, she was unable to mask the posts from all of the girl's friends. These individuals reported her actions and the information was made public. This led to a further rise in tensions between the girls both online and offline, and sits firmly within Child, Haridakis and Petronio's (2011) categorisation of privacy turbulence.

A similar example exploring this issue, which was introduced earlier in the context of gossip, was reported by Blake. In this extract, Blake reveals that a mixture of Facebook and a mental error, results in key interpersonal information being revealed:

Blake: "Say if you're with your friend or something, and then like you're talking about someone or something -I haven't done this by the way- you're talking about someone to THEM instead of someone else. And then they'll be like, 'What you on about?'. And you'll be like 'Oh uhm'. It can just kind of be upsetting. If you realize someone is talking behind your back."

(Interview with Blake, Ref 7)

In both accounts it is a combination of human error and technological hindrance which result in key information being accidentally distributed and privacy ownership transforming into privacy turbulence. In each case something is revealed to a target, who was meant to remain unaware, and this revealed an inconsistency of character or relationship. This resulted in social sanctions and tension between those involved as conflicts escalated.

These extracts epitomise many similar stories encountered throughout this study, all indicating that many adolescents felt that once something was posted online it was nearly impossible to control who might see it, or where it might go. Interestingly the extract Saab details is one of the very rare occasions when an individual made concerted efforts to direct the digital route that their comments might take. Although as the outcome attests, this met with limited success. This brings us to an explanation of why these adolescents find it challenging to manage information in the context of social networking.

### **Explosive Sharing and Digital Demands**

There are two prominent issues which make the management of information difficult, both of which are related to how users must interface with Facebook. The first problem stems from the way in which Facebook automatically shares information. In an effort to guarantee that individuals are 'bonded' with friends, and kept abreast of everything they are doing, the site publishes every click, share, comment and idea that is made. These activities can appear on the homepage newsfeed, flash up as a notification on profiles or even be found in a scrolling section that displays activities between friends of friends; most of whom the user will not have actually 'friended'. As posts receive more attention, in either clicks or likes, they are promoted further up the feed of stories so that they are more noticeable. This can be a positive function when attention is focused on interesting or celebratory events, but it can draw very public attention to controversial topics or interactions. In the previous chapter we noted the downfalls of this in regards to the creation of likes and virtual capital. Below, Geoff reports how he feels when he is confronted (as an onlooker) with online social conflict:

Interviewer- “So that all happened online? All happened on Facebook? Did one person say one thing, and another person said another thing?”

Geoff- “Yeah, yeah yeah. And then other people get involved and there’s like a massive stream of comments. And it just invades your newsfeed. Because there is so many comments and so many likes, that that’s on the main...that’s on the top story for like two days.”

Interviewer- “And do you see...If it’s stuck there, I’m guessing you see it?”

Geoff- “Yeah yeah”

(Interview with Geoff, Ref 15)

As social conflicts or ‘dramas’ are important events within the teenage peer group, as they can affect friendships and values which are used to constitute that community, it is vital for those within the group to possess some knowledge of what transpires. This allows individuals them to form opinions and, potentially, to pick a side. (This is evidenced in **Chapter Six**, where the perfume girls use gossip to deliberate over a local conflict).

Due to the interest that such arguments receive, and how Facebook boosts this virtual attention, these conflicts are increasingly promoted online. Many adolescents feel pressured when engaging online, because they are acutely aware of what happens should they become embroiled in a virtual fight, or let slip a piece of private information. Thanks to the widespread sharing of data via Facebook, situations like this are liable to become public knowledge and impact interactions both digital and offline. Although the creators of Facebook may have intended their widespread broadcast system as a positive way to share communal activities, this study argues that it has instead added an element of angst

to many social experiences. This platform offers the potential for private thoughts, or thoughts which are perceived to be private, to transform from simple comments into far reaching controversial social statements. Statements which the original user has little control over.

However, as the story about Saab's sister demonstrates, there are precautions that can be used to control exactly who views what is shared or posted. If the social stakes are as high as the teenagers in this study have made them out to be, why are more individuals not taking the time to ensure that their data is seen by the approved few? This brings us to the second issue regarding information management and Facebook.

Although nearly all teenagers in this study had a basic functional understanding of how to send messages, tag friends in photos and change some privacy settings, when asked how to edit friend lists or who could view their posts, there was a startling lack of familiarity. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with one of the younger participants, who had expressed discomfort over messages and posts that another peer had involved him in:

Mark- (Pointing to his profile on a laptop) "There's the one. He's got, he sent loads of stupid stuff."

Interviewer- "Usually if you go to your friend lists, you can unfriend him that way if he is annoying you."

Mark- "I don't, I really don't know how to delete some one."

(Interview with Mark, Ref 12)

At first glance this lack of digital savvy might suggest that many guardians are right to feel panicked over their child's online experiences, and that fears over privacy are well grounded. Over the course of this project, the researcher received many concerns over whether teenagers understood the potential long term ramifications of their actions and if these adolescents were able to manage their profiles safely. Sentiments like those above suggest that for some there is a worrying lack of knowledge regarding social networks and privacy control.

However, a Pew paper reports that: "60% of teen Facebook users keep their profiles private, and most report high levels of confidence in their ability to manage their settings" (Madden et al, 2013). In a following statement it also reveals that: "Teens take other steps to shape their reputation, manage their networks, and mask information they don't want others to know; 74% of teen social media users have deleted people from their network or friends list" (Madden et al, 2013). This latter quote shows that although there are a number who are unaware of many of the control features that are available to them on Facebook (like Mark), the majority are in fact well versed in their use. These statistics, when compared with stories about teenagers involved in conflicts prompted by poor information management, offer a contradictory picture of what is happening. On one hand it seems that some teens are unaware of how to manage their posts and information, leading to an increased chance in social conflict. On the other, the majority of adolescents are reported to be adept at manipulating who is able to view the things they share.

Rather than suggesting that there is one correct answer, it is much more plausible that this diverse array of reports indicates a vast spectrum of experience and skill upon which teenagers might be located. For the participants of this study the main issue they had was that it was impossible to adequately manage their profile in order to appeal to all audiences. Editing their activities to suit specific groups requires both a working knowledge of the appropriate settings and an ability to perpetually, and consciously, be aware of the many reactions they might receive. Although many adolescents might have the former skills, it was the latter part which was most concerning for adolescents. This is likely because the process of learning how to engage with a number of people, whilst considering their responses, is part of the development of teenager into adult (boyd, 2008; Forrester, 1992). Indeed many older individuals still lack the necessary awareness to prevent negative social sanctions which are caused by misjudged or shared information. In a traditional environment, where communication was offline and face-to-face, identities would be managed in line with the expected reactions of those who were immediately involved in the interaction (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959, 1967). Or they were produced alongside considerations of how those within a social group might react should they become privy to certain communications. However, thanks to the technological functions that sites like Facebook have introduced, which radically increases the range and ability of posts in terms of audience viewership, the likelihood of an individual being able to control who witnesses their actions is now very unlikely.

For Saab's sister to effectively ensure that her conversation about her 'nemesis' was kept private she would have display both a very skilled understanding of Facebook's features, and an equally effective social comprehension of how her ideas might impact all her surrounding peers. With these two factors she would need to be vigilant in ensuring that every post she authored, and every post that was written concerning the argument, was edited so that it was truly private between her close friends. Only then might she have the chance to prevent any leakage of information occurring online, not to mention the similar offline efforts that would need to be undertaken to prevent further escalation. The same vigilance would be required from Blake, in all communications to ensure that no mental slips resulted in revealing damaging social comments and judgements to the person such statements relate to.

The likelihood of success in managing these tasks is fairly low, and arguably lower still when we demand such ability from teenagers who are still only beginning to understand many of the social rules that govern adult interactions. These difficulties, which are exacerbated by the technologies that teenagers are using, have led many adolescents to reconsider becoming too involved with each other online, due to the potential for 'Drama'. Instead they are spurred on to focus their attentions on other applications where information control is easier; this is covered in the next chapter.

### **Back to the Future? Facebook Timelines and Privacy Control**

One final issue, within the context of Facebook, which concerns adolescents and problematic information control, is the 'Timeline feature'. Timeline allows users to instantly navigate to a specific chronological point within a profile history. This means

that if an individual has possessed an account for seven years, for example from 2009-2015, then they (and their 'friends') are able to view any posts, photos, etc which are related to that profile at the chosen point. Although this does allow users the chance to capture their lives online and review memories, for the adolescents interviewed it created issues regarding how they structured both their online and offline identities. Many participants were aware that in hindsight they might regard past digital actions unfavourably, and that these displays could present awkward contradictions in terms of identity. Interestingly however, few were able to realise that many of the social issues they currently encountered were produced by the very same problems. In the following extract from a focus group, a set of fifteen year-old boys explore past digital behaviours:

Interviewer- "So have you lads ever experienced something where you have put something online, not just in relevance to your parents, but you've put something online that you perhaps regret doing?"

(There is a collective 'Yeah')

Geoff- "Year seven statuses!"

Alfie- "I put a picture of my brother up, he killed me."

Interviewer- "You said year seven statuses. The way you access that I imagine is through timeline. What do you lot think of timeline?"

Chris- "I think it's cool."

Geoff- "Yeah, you can see how bad you were."

Sid- "What's timeline?"

Interviewer- "It's where you can instantly go back and see..."

Sid- "Oh that thing."



Steve- "I was just like 'Delete, delete, delete'"

Martin- "It brings back all the bad stuff that you do."

Chris- "You can see what you've done in your past. You can see how much you've changed. It's a good thing, but your personality changes every time you're on there. It's quite easy to delete things off your timeline, but you can't delete them off the internet."

Alfie- "I think if you use it carefully it's good, but if not it can be bad"

(Focus group with Alfie, Geoff, Sid, Chris and Martin, Ref 15)

In this extract we witness the boys retrospectively analysing their past digital activities. Immediately these teenagers are able to draw parallels between posts they produced when they were younger and how these expressions might now create awkward problems for their current selves. All boys within the group, with the exception of Sid, are well aware of timeline and its features. Overall sentiments relate to how these individuals felt compelled to edit their profiles to remove any evidence of displays they deemed 'bad'. In this context, bad is likely to mean socially awkward or embarrassing as opposed to morally wrong. In another focus group containing all female participants, similar responses were encountered:

Interviewer- "So you don't like that things are on Facebook and you can't do something about it?"

Olivia- "Yeah you change, there is no point."

Interviewer- "Okay. When you're older, do you think you'll look at what you did on Facebook? What will you think?"

There is nervous laughter.

Stacey- “Not good”

Interviewer- “Why do you think that?”

Stacey- “Because I have with like things on Facebook. I know that the pictures that I have, I’m going to...like...” (She pulls a face of disgust)

Olivia- “Like selfie, Oh no that’s me!”

Interviewer- “So do you just leave it behind.”

Stacey- “Ignore it, yeah.”

(Interview with Olivia and Stacey, Ref 9)

Once again, from this extract, we can see that there is a collective agreement on how past performances of self can be awkwardly judged against newer displays, due to a combination of youthful self-expression and technological data capture. Participants throughout this project made specific reference to occasions when they had witnessed images of themselves, or statements they had made, from older periods and felt embarrassment. In these examples, adolescents acknowledged that personal growth had been responsible for these experiences, and they demonstrated an understanding that individuals often adapt and evolve their identity and sense of self. However, it is here that technology adds a problematic element. Whereas older versions of self can be forgotten or hidden in an offline setting, sites like Facebook not only now crystallise these performances, but also allow those with access the chance to evaluate them. Whilst users do have the potential to delete these representations (which is noted by Chris) or edit friend settings, the previous section demonstrates that this is not always easy or possible to do. Even when steps are taken to edit and prevent more dated information from

damaging current performances, deletion does not immediately ensure an effective resolution.

To return to the works of Child and Petronio (2011), when choosing to delete information that has been shared into the group setting, the user attempts to take back that knowledge into a private setting and exert 'privacy control'. However it is debatable how effective this is, as removing these posts from public view does not mean they will be forgotten. Dannah boyd (2011) explores the story of 'Brittany', a girl who was deliberately singled out online and antagonised after it transpired she had cheated on her boyfriend. Derogatory comments were posted on her photos and her actions were mocked frequently. Although she deleted these remarks and the evidence that had led to them, she was of course unable to delete the knowledge of her actions to those who were involved and still aggrieved by the situation. Indeed, as Chris notes in the first extract above, *"It's quite easy to delete things off your timeline, but you can't delete them off the internet."* Although he is not commenting on the same social networking issue as Boyd, he demonstrates a wider awareness of the capacity required to edit his online self. He understands that in order to successfully negotiate identity and digital technology you must meet the caveats laid out in the previous section, as well as understand the unwanted immortality that the internet and social networking can grant to statements and images. This is further evidence, alongside the studies conducted by groups like Pew (Madden et al, 2013), that teenagers (often through trial and error) have developed a first-hand understanding of the negative effects of ill-conceived sharing.

It is dependent upon the social skills of the user (i.e. if they can successfully negotiate the inconsistencies and tensions) or on the consensus of the group as to whether the 'face

work' (Goffman, 1959; Tracy, 2002) that has been altered, can now be reconciled with the offline performances. Tracy writes that "Face is the view of self each person seeks to uphold in an interaction. Face-threat is the challenge a person experiences in a particular situation to upholding a facet of identity that he or she cares about" (Tracy, 2002, 16). This is important when we consider it in conjunction with Goffman's belief that the 'self' is always under construction during any given interaction. Goffman (1959) states that each individual seeks to uphold and project an idealised version of themselves during physical communication, and that each party involved will strive to create a discourse which is mutually beneficial to either side, without discrediting or inhibiting the roles being performed.

Lionheart and his friend, the blusher wearing promoter, are once again excellent examples of how information management, which relates to a perceived face, can go awry when social networking is included. Similarly to boyd's work (2011), although the photo in question was removed to prevent further social damage, it did not eradicate the events that had already taken place and the consequences to the young man's capital. His attempt to affect a change in how others perceived him offline, perhaps as more attractive, backfired. Rather than producing a positive reaction, it undermined his projected 'self' of a popular 'masculine' promoter.

Both Goffman (1959) and Mead (1934) argue that the self is a fluid concept, under construction in every interaction we make. Within the confines of that social interaction, each person attempts to show aspects of themselves that they would have others accept. As the above demonstrates, there are many times when this can become difficult: "If an

individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards” (Goffman, 1959, 50). The source and range of inconsistencies can of course be found in offhand remarks, past historical knowledge of someone’s actions or their physical appearance: “Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had...” (Goffman, 1959, 56).

In the context of Facebook and its timeline feature (which allows instant access to past comments, posts and pictures) the ease with which others can access ‘past performances’ – which might contradict current ones - is problematic for teenagers who wish to change their identity performance convincingly. If the information they need to change has been placed in group setting and is common knowledge, then the attempt to reclaim can be just as damaging as its potential availability for public viewing. In terms of social status, noticeable efforts to refine public identity could make the user a subject of ridicule, as peers refuse to accept their new ‘face’. The discussion in this chapter provides further support to the argument that Facebook, and social networking sites which have a similar functionality, are complicating many elements of social interaction.

### **Permanency**

The combination of pressures in attempting to both manage information and juggle potentially contradictory past and present performances, has resulted in many teenagers choosing to limit their activity within Facebook. These issues together form a problem which this thesis titles as ‘permanency’. This is where the ability for information to be recalled and immortalised in the social consciousness, has become a key concern for

many participants when they considered online and offline interaction. With nearly every teenager reporting that they had suffered some form of social mishap thanks to Facebook's influence on interaction, it is easy to see why so many teenagers feel agitated over their identity presentations and the spaces where they are performing them.

Potentially, these experiences could be positive in the context of personal development. Like many situations which are experienced throughout adolescence, situations like these have the potential to teach delicate social skills. It is important that an individual is able to manage identity and key personal information, as these are key features of successful social interaction across broad settings. However, though there are potential benefits, there is also the possibility that the presence of this technology can have a long term negative effect. Many people, not just the teenagers in this project, have awkward encounters where they have accidentally expressed statements which are detrimental to relationships, or found that previous actions had been used to undermine current efforts. Both old and young generations experience problems with gossip or face management, in settings that have little to do with digital networking and which cause similar dilemmas. This prompts the question, do platforms like Facebook complicate these circumstances? Although it is impossible to definitively state yes or no in regards to wider society, the work in this chapter indicates that participants in this study would certainly tend to believe it does.

In a traditional pre-SNS setting, awkward social mishaps would only remain problematic if they could be recalled precisely, and could be successfully reported, by those involved. On many occasions it is unlikely that systems existed which would document social

communications between groups of adolescents in the 1980s (for example) and so things could be forgotten or misremembered. This means that past performances or comments would only be valuable if they could be remembered and proved by an individual or group. This lack of specificity arguably allows people to move on, to recall situations in a more favourable way, or to forget. More importantly it allows people to evolve and develop character without the threat of personal evolution being questioned. However now, the very opposite of this is true.

Permanency means that in the context of social networking, arguments, conflicts and ill-advised actions are not only preserved but also available to be cherry picked. It is little wonder that recent reports indicate that the younger generations of today feel more vulnerable, stressed and less able to cope than previous adolescents. Recent reports indicate that many 13-17 year olds mirror the extreme stress levels found in adults (Harris Interactive, 2013). This suggests that what might have originally been a tool for sharing fun moments and building bonds, has now become part of the reason why individuals can feel constantly locked into a tense behavioural cycle; feverishly trying to keep up with the social demands of maintaining appearances whilst garnering capital through juggling ever changing cultural values (Turkle, 2011).

This is further emphasised when we consider that these displays of self are on show 24/7, regardless of whether the individual is logged online to defend them. For anyone who owns a profile there is the likelihood that somewhere, someone else can examine that portrayal without the owner knowing or being able to manage their examination. In terms of gossip processes, this can create further negative consequences as the words

that you have used, or online behaviours you have displayed, can be quoted and demonstrated verbatim. We noted this in **Chapters Five** and **Six**, where teens would point out profiles and physically show them to their friends. Whilst previously others might have to rely on the power of their memory to slander or deride, now the online world can fill in any blanks and stimulate further critique. This blurring of boundaries between offline and online, and the frequency and ease with which information can be shared between users means that adults and adolescents are reachable and potentially accountable for any action (digital and physical) at all times. These technological affordances, which have set expectations regarding speed, sharing and privacy, are the key difference in how many adolescent interactions are now shaped; resulting in influences that reach not only onto online behaviours but also offline experiences.

This tends to paint a rather dark picture of the future of digital communication for adolescents, and conjures images of many distressed Facebook users who are permanently anxious over their online activities. Though many participants did express disdain towards the site and how it had coerced their behaviours into the patterns that have been analysed in these chapters, they were not without their own strategies in managing these issues. Some teens were able to master the demands needed to ensure an effective and peaceable profile, with the more confident individual appearing suited to this task; this is unsurprising given the correlations found between confidence, social ability and popularity (Fine, 1981). Individuals who spoke positively about the site and their experiences, were often the leaders in many focus groups and felt comfortable in their opinions and performances.



However, many were not as adept. These teens reported a decrease in the time spent using Facebook and regarded it as a less important platform. Although the majority of adolescents still had profiles, and checked them sporadically, they preferred to utilise other sites when conducting social communication with peers. Rather than constantly upload posts and photos, as many claimed they had when they first activated their accounts, Facebook had become a way in which to check up on the peer group whilst reducing their actual involvement. This allowed them to remain informed and offered the option of becoming socially involved when it was judged worthwhile. Thus they could maintain a safe distance from detrimental interaction but still take part in important peer interactions. A strategy which would not have been available to them had they simply deleted their profiles.

These two positions are by no means the definitive, as every participant could be placed on a spectrum between either group. Some might strive to use Facebook to still gather virtual capital but are perhaps unable to master the norm performances required. Whilst others, who might attempt to limit their involvement, found themselves still being very active users. Interestingly, as we will examine further in the next chapter, the appropriate amount of digital activity was often highly contested and sometimes cited as a factor in choosing to ignore Facebook in favour of other sites. 'Oversharers' and generalised attention seeking behaviour, were negative activities that prompted individuals to turn to platforms where they could implement more stringent control over information flows.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the challenges that are present for Facebook users when attempting to manage personal information. It has highlighted how contemporary technology can complicate the control of personal content, or increase the likelihood of private sentiments being shared amongst the wider community; both of which can reveal identity inconsistencies. In situations where this has happened, it has resulted in public tensions and social sanctions aimed at the initial user (who has been affected by mistakes in their own online performances or undermined by the rapid sharing of information via social platforms). This has led to a number of adolescent users choosing to reduce the amount of time that they actively engage with each other via Facebook. These teenagers often seemed torn between wishing they could use Facebook for some of the positive social interactions that it facilitated, and relieved that they were free of the tensions it could produce. Typically, those who had decreased the time they spent using this platform were at the older end of the spectrum of adolescents included in this study. This could suggest that prolonged exposure to, or use of, Facebook results in many of the complications that have been covered within this thesis. This could be because, as both offline and online social networks grow in size, the relationships involved begin to comprise of both online and offline roots and individuals may place more value upon the information that is produced and displayed online which is used to navigate and manage these ties. Thus, this information, and the individual's ability to manipulate it, will become increasingly critical, in a way that may not be noted with others who have spent less time and energy in the same virtual domain. To test the validity of this theory, further study would need to be conducted on the attitudes of younger teens who have recently begun interacting via Facebook.

However, interestingly it appears that those at the younger end of the spectrum preferred to interact on newer platforms that have become recently available. Discussions in focus groups introduced the researcher to a plethora of other social networks, all of which seemed to capitalise upon issues which Facebook had either influenced or failed to remedy. The next chapter will conclude this section through drawing together the analysis on virtual and social capital, information management and permanency, by exploring how teenagers have attempted to resolve these dilemmas through incorporating other social networking sites into their communicative practices.

## **Chapter Nine: The Rise of the Selective Social Network**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores why some teenagers choose to use Snapchat instead of Facebook when communicating with friends. Facebook has been cited as promoting anxiety amongst young users because of how it influences methods of interaction (O’Keffe & Pearson, 2011). This is due to problems concerning information management, identity performances and the production of virtual capital. These issues have led to some teenagers being unable to maintain a coherent and consistent public image that they were happy with. This chapter demonstrates how Snapchat counters such issues. It begins by exploring how users engage on both Snapchat and Facebook, and the related social norms which define acceptable standards of use. It then moves into an examination of how Snapchat allows information to be sent, received and stored. This allows for a comparison between both social networking sites and a discussion of how permanency (covered in **Chapter Eight**) features in the context of Snapchat. This is followed by an analysis of selfies, which will explore how these are images are used as tool to construct social identities and negotiate norms. This includes an exploration of the role that inter-personal relationships and social context plays when a user performs ‘self’ through these

types of photo. The chapter concludes by analysing how these elements of digital communication are linked and influence adolescent popularity. These discussions will provide us with a sense of how contemporary teenagers perceive their relationships within the context of the digital landscape they inhabit, whilst also offering a comparative insight into how current digital platforms intersect with adolescent practices and cultural behaviours.

### **Over-sharing and Information Flow: Facebook and Snapchat**

Throughout interviews and focus groups, there were many instances where adolescents would associate specific online behaviours with negative social judgements. A frequent complaint concerned other users who shared information which was deemed to be inappropriate in terms of both frequency and style. Previous works on this topic have noted that some digital users are prone to sharing more information than is socially sanctioned (Siedman, 2014). This behaviour is labelled as 'over-sharing', with individuals titled as 'over-sharers', and has been stated by Pew (Madden, 2013) as a crucial factor in negative attitudes toward Facebook. Out of a collective 1,800 people, 36% announced their dislike stemmed from other users sharing too much information about themselves. Similarly, 36% were annoyed that others could post information about the user without permission, and 27% were irritated that they could view comments and posts that were not intended for them (Madden, 2013). In this study, similar feelings of irritation were noted and explained as the result of constant exposure to vast quantities of unwanted information. Paired with these frustrations were rationales that explained over-sharing as an attempt to attract attention from others. If we consider the critical value that is placed on producing positively approved reactions amongst large audiences, and the power this has on the performance of identity and interpersonal relations, it is easy to see why some

might deliberately use these sites to disseminate information they think will endear them to peers (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). It is also easy to understand how frustrating this might be for other users who encounter these displays without wanting to.

Like many forms of social interaction, there seemed to be an acceptable amount of online activity that could be transgressed. When this line was crossed, both the shared information and the user would be regarded with distaste. In the following extract, the 'Perfume Girls' detail their views on over-sharing and its association with attention seeking:

Dior- "You can't really put a picture up on Instagram and be like 'Text me!'"

Chanel- "Yeah do you know what!? Some people do that on Facebook. They put their status like, 'Oh my god, inbox me' and I'm just like, 'If you want them to inbox you, then inbox them first!'"

There is a chorus of agreement from the other girls.

Interviewer- "Why do you think they do that?"

Dior- "Because they want more attention. Attention seekers."

Chanel- "Because they don't put a name. They just put inbox me."

(Focus Group with Perfume Girls', Ref 5)

In this conversation, the girls comment on behaviour that they deem inappropriate. The discussion focuses on individuals who request private communications from others on a public platform, where many (not just the intended recipient) can view the exchange. They judge this act as a deliberate attempt to gain attention from the peer group online

(Mehdizadeh, 2010). As many of these sites allow messages to be sent privately, without anyone else being able to witness the exchange, their explanation is plausible. When users post messages like 'inbox me' or 'text me' in a non-direct form, there is a subsequent implication (alongside the main message) that the individual has something valuable to share. This can provoke curiosity as others see the message and seek to understand its intentions. Thus ambiguous posts can capture the attention of a digital audience as they become, to a varying degree, involved in what is happening (Deters and Mehl, 2013; Winter et al, 2014).

This is another example of how inclusion and exclusion through digital platforms can define relationships. To be included in this exchange would place an individual within a set group and publicly display their 'membership' (Bauman, 2004). However, whilst it is plausible that posts like this do indicate a user possessing key information, the girls believe that the true intentions behind it are unseemly. For them it is an attempt to capture the focus of others and expand their digital audience. However rather than achieving this, the girls above believe that they have seen through the performance and judge it negatively. Work by Winters (2014) and Ong (2011) demonstrates that there are correlations between individuals who constantly update statuses, and personality traits which mark these same users out to be narcissistic or in need of constant validation. These studies highlight that the traits are perceived to be undesirable and there is a tendency for other users to distance themselves from such behaviours and display irritation over these public attention performances.

Focus groups with male teenagers highlighted how over-sharing focused on requests to participate in online games:

Interviewer- "Are there things on Facebook that you don't like?"

Geoff- "Pointless statuses."

Alfie- "Annoying invites"

Martin- "Dragon city requests."

(There is a widespread muttering and laughing in support of this)

Martin- "Game requests! So annoying."

Chris- "I hate it most when you have a photo and it says 'Like this to have this money. That's really annoying."

Sid- "There is quite a lot of stuff that is tasteless on Facebook."

Interviewer- "Like what?"

Sid- "I don't know but there is, it's a bit offensive. It's Facebook and it makes it alright but if it was outside of it, it wouldn't be alright."

(Focus group with Year 11 boys, age Ref 15)

In this example the boys also express irritation at 'pointless statuses' alongside complaining about notifications asking them to join online games or view unwanted photos. In the last extract the girls were annoyed at passively witnessing 'personal' exchanges that sought attention, whilst here the boys express a similar anger at being purposefully targeted. Upon being included in the games or photos, the user would receive a number of notifications designed to incite participation (Phan & Chaparro, 2013). Over time, if subjected to a barrage of these, many users might feel annoyed. This



combination of unrequested notifications and ‘pointless’ statuses creates a mass of distracting and useless information; prompting the anger noted above because these alerts consume the users time and focus. This means that they are distracted from engaging with social networks in an effort to further inter-personal relations, construct approved identities and generate virtual capital. Ultimately situations like this increase the likelihood that these users will associate negative feelings with the platform they originate from.

The large volume and frequency of undesirable information, coupled with the issues that are now present in being able to control personal information, has led many adolescents to seek platforms where they are better able to specify whom they shared their activities with (Madden, 2013; Lang, 2015; Stieger et al, 2013). Platforms like Facebook, which share as much data as possible within a community, are prompting users to turn to systems where direction can be more easily implemented. Not only do teenagers wish to be able to choose who views their activities, but they also want to specify whose information they are subjected to (Lang, 2015; Winter et al, 2014).

In previous chapters, discussions have highlighted that some teenagers were not capable of directing the information they shared via Facebook because of a lack of technical knowledge (see **Chapter Eight**) Other adolescents also experienced social tension or conflict when posts were shared uncontrollably through the newsfeed function. At the root of these problems was the complaint that the posts which users authored could be viewed by many who were not consciously intended to view them, and that altering settings to prevent them involved laborious technical efforts.

These sentiments were not encountered when discussing Snapchat. Whilst posts on Facebook are broadcast to the largest possible audience, assembled from accepted friends and potential acquaintances, Snapchat's message delivery is much more focused. Once a message or video is taken, the user is able to choose from a list of their available contacts to whom they can send it. This list is created by adding individuals via specific Snapchat names, with communication access decided by the user who receives the invitation. Only through using the exact profile name are individuals able to connect. This is unlike Facebook's suggested friends lists which encourage people to add those who are perceived to be good matches. These potential connections feature on the newsfeed in the same space as advertising, with the user unable to control who they see as a possible 'match'.

The use of specific names means that individuals must share contact information before being able to exchange any 'snaps'. Snapchat, unlike Facebook, does not currently seek to expand networks through suggesting further contacts. This conveys a far greater degree of control on the user, who has the potential to limit their communications to those they consciously choose to.

The difference between how each platform facilitates social connection, and the accompanying etiquettes which govern how users become contacts, influences the value of information which is shared. The following extract demonstrates how the context and intended audience of digital images feature heavily in how the image and its author are perceived and subsequently communicated with. More importantly, it points out the

difference in how Snapchat allows the user to control what they see, and who witnesses their activities:

Interviewer- Okay so, if you get selfies on Snapchat, correct me if I'm wrong. That's funny. But if you see someone taking photos on Facebook how do you feel about that.

(There is a collective response of "That's weird" from several boys)

Interviewer- Why is that weird?

Chris- Everyone can see it. Its so weird.

Interviewer- Okay

Geoff- Snapchat, you can control who sees it. Roughly.

Interviewer- Roughly?

Martin- People can screenshot.

Alfie- On Facebook, if everyone can really see it, and then if your friends like it, then their friends can see it and it can carry on like that. Snapchat only your close friends can see it.

Geoff- Its just kind of like on Facebook, your like sharing with pretty much everyone that's on Facebook, you could potentially show everyone a picture of yourself but on Snapchat you could just like share it with people you want.

(Focus group with Year 11 boys, Ref 15)

This extract highlights social norms that these boys believe exist. For these teens there are appropriate forms, and digital platforms, for sharing content with specific audiences (Qiu et al, 2015). They express a dislike of sharing selfies through Facebook, yet accept

this visual communication when it is sent via Snapchat. The justification for this is they are able to define their audience. This juxtaposition is also encountered later in the chapter where we explore how specific types of images, and the manner in which they are shared, feature in the construction of social norms which dictate appropriate online practices. In later extracts, overly constructed and edited photos ('posey' images) are seen as distasteful. However in this case, it is the potential viewing audience which defines whether the picture is categorised as positive or negative. If a selfie is shared publicly then it has the potential to be deemed as crass or attention seeking (Winters et al, 2014; Ong, 2011). Whilst the very same image, when shared via more direct means (arguably to even the same number of individuals) does incite the same criticism.

The increased exposure to public pictures which are deemed socially unacceptable is partly responsible for why so many adolescents in this project have chosen to use Snapchat. This platform offers easier and better control over the information that is both shared and received. Not only is this relevant in discussions regarding the production of identity through visual images, but it is also relevant when noting how adolescents have overcome the challenge of increased communication demands. Whilst many teens reported feeling over-burdened on Facebook, Snapchat offers a reprieve from constant flows of undesired data. Of course, though the user can control who they receive messages from, this does not guarantee that there will be less pressure to communicate. Indeed these friends might still make frequent demands on their time. However these demands will only come from the individuals that they have selected. This could of course be argued to be the same dynamic on Facebook, with its 'friending' system. Although as we have seen when exploring privacy settings and friend editing, choosing who (or what)

appears on your feed it is not quite as simple as it seems. Furthermore, Snapchat's specific user interface reduces 'drama' through allowing the user to directly control (at least initially) where their message is sent.

This is not the only function that appears to have encouraged many to use Snapchat more actively in daily interactions. The following section explores how Snapchat's time sensitive messaging system has affected the role of permanency (see **Chapter Eight**).

### **Snapchat and Permanency**

At the time of Facebook's introduction to the college users of the mid 2000s, computers or laptops were still the basis for most digital interaction. Although phones were used to make calls and send texts, and featured heavily in many adolescent cultures (Harper, 2005; Longoria et al, 2011), they were not able to (as they can now) offer the same level of communication that the desktop could. In order to send pictures of any quality, or share a video conference, the user would require an internet connected computer device. Until the arrival of the smartphone and its access to high speed internet, as well as the inclusion of clearer cameras, these functions were not available on portable phones. This meant that digital communication could be argued to have a 'base' during those years before smartphones allowed the same applications to be accessed at any location or time. For users to engage with each other online, it truly had to be through a device that was tethered to a specific location.

Facebook was conceived when computers and laptops were held to be the norm in social interaction, and its design was created in line with these boundaries. Though there are mobile versions of Facebook which can be accessed via smartphones, they are still unable

to offer the same level of experience found on laptops or desktop services. The merit of pointing out this distinction lies in how Snapchat differs from Facebook not only in its material production and use, but also in its subsequent value within adolescent interaction. Newer networking companies have focused on integrating their software with portable devices from the very start. This means that their functionality has always been produced in line with these technologies, rather than engineered down from a more expansive option, like Facebook. Acknowledging this is important when exploring how newer social sites influence the issues of permanency and identity production that have been encountered previously. Crucially this is because these new digital platforms have been produced in line with the affordances that smartphones offer; thus resulting in the creation of elements that utilize these opportunities and are moulded by them. This is useful to remember when we explore the role that Snapchat plays in the dissemination of personal images and identity performances.

The emphasis of communication through Snapchat is that the users interact ‘in the moment’. Each message, whether it is a text or photo, is available for a pre-selected period of time. This requires those involved in the interaction to fully devote their attention to it, lest they miss that window and it is deleted. A by-product of this system is that the communications seem to be more valued by users, who are aware of the fleeting nature of the data they are receiving:

“It’s exciting I guess. You have to be there or it’s gone.”

(Focus Group with Christine aged 14, Ref 7)

As digital communication has been incorporated into everyday practices, we have discovered that “technology sets expectations about speed” (Turkle, 2011, 149). Most users are very aware that messages are beamed instantaneously to the designated address, and that it is easy for recipients to access them. Turkle’s points are linked to the affordances that newer technologies bring in terms of increasing the frequency and speed of personal communication. In her latest book she reports that teenagers and adults alike feel tethered to their mobile devices, perpetually responding to contact whilst waiting to hear replies to their own communications. This forms an ironic cycle, consisting of impatiently waiting for a response whilst feeling coerced to respond as quickly as possible to prevent flouting social etiquette. “Who says that we always have to be ready to communicate? Indeed, who says? Listening to what young people miss may teach us what they need. They need attention” (Turkle, 2011, 239). Under the constant onslaught of communication, as interaction with a peer becomes yet another task to be completed, “demands become depersonalized” (Turkle, 2011. 155). This is a theme that has been encountered earlier in this chapter, where we witnessed many complaints focused on being subjected to lots of irrelevant information.

Snapchat appears to provide an answer to these issues. It offers opportunities for both sender and recipient to take part in an exchange where, for a small amount of time, they are consciously required to focus their attention solely on each other. The design of the app, and its focus on sharing captured images via portable devices, means that it has an advantage over other services which require lengthier text descriptions to achieve the same outcome:

“It’s pleasing to know you have snaps or you have messages. It’s just nice to have them”

(Interview with Kesha, Ref 4)

Turkle (2011) posits that we are searching for a system that provides us with the benefits of physical interaction but allows us to dictate when, where, and for how long we engage, without the restraints of being socially culpable face-to-face. Snapchat arguably provides many of these requirements.

Most importantly, one of its key appeals is that the fleeting nature of images addresses some of the problems caused by the recorded permanency on Facebook. As each message is deleted automatically after a specified period, Snapchat offers interaction that does not hold the problematic social repercussions that have been noted in the previous chapters. This is not to suggest that it has the potential to wipe memories of awkward transactions between users, as conflicts and slips will still occur if captured and transmitted. However, in the context of fights which have included direct and tangible references to posts or photos, Snapchat is unlikely to be involved in the same way because it does not automatically store every nuance of conversation. Instead it means that some users must rely on the ability of those involved, or on other social platforms, to remember and recall the details of what happened.

This has a direct impact on how identity is negotiated. As the images which contribute toward the user’s presentation of face are viewed for a brief window, future face work (Goffman, 1959; Tracy, 2002) is unlikely to be threatened in the same way that the



timeline feature on Facebook can allow. One of the reasons that Snapchat has been received so positively is perhaps because it allows for a greater degree of experimentation of self between users. Evidence of this can be found in the following section which explores the relationship between Snapchat selfies, and the social consequences of altering an images initial context.

### **Snapchat and Selfies**

In any discussion that explored Snapchat, or digital platforms where image sharing was prevalent, adolescents always mentioned selfies. In this section we will explore the mechanics of the image, the motivations that underlie its production and what happens when it's initial audience context is changed. These elements relate directly to how teenagers produce identity amongst their peer group, and indicate how productions of self are influenced by the digital platforms which facilitate them. This can be linked once more to Goffman's (1959) argument that identity is a fluid construct, constantly edited to appeal to specific audiences. In each interaction where a specific characteristic is employed to appeal to that front stage, there is always a different version that is being placed out of immediate sight. This type of performance management is evidenced in the utilisation of the selfie within specific contexts.

In order to understand the relationship between Snapchat and the perceived value that teens place on its method of image communication, we have to explore the contrasting time states which are applicable to these shared pictures. For the purpose of this argument we need to define images into two categories which will allow us to understand both time contexts and their role in social communication.

The first group is of course the selfie. This was noted earlier as a photo usually produced of the photographer's face, often from a front facing camera, that may also include a background element. These photos have become popular with the rise of internet connected phones, and allow the user to place themselves within a scene (Rooney, 2015). For those who are looking to accrue likes or display support for online claims (e.g. the visiting of culturally approved designations, or social events) then selfies can be used in conjunction with a status (Qiu et al, 2015). The image and status combined function like academic references supporting quoted text, strengthening the argument (or in this case the validity) of the individual's statement. For many teens the selfie is 'just a regular thing'. Originally these photos were frequently posted on Facebook. Increasingly it appears that selfies are now commonly posted on sites like Instagram and Snapchat; two platforms whose functional layouts promote the sending and receiving of visual messages over any other type of communication.

The second image group could be defined broadly as anything that is not a selfie. For us this refers to a photo that is captured where the photographer is not present or witnessed producing the shot. During interviews, these photos were mentioned less often than the selfie but were indicated to still be a common online feature. Sometimes labelled as 'posey' shots, these photos are openly acknowledged to have been created with a specific purpose of portraying certain beauty ideals or contriving to fit other valued norms. As we will see, the negativity that is associated with these deliberately produced photos is perhaps ironic considering the similar role that the selfie appears to play in the performance of self.

The key difference between either image group relates to the social norms that dictate acceptable usage. The placement of these photos, and the cultural connotations which relate to the sites they appear on, are part of the construction of normative identity behaviour amongst some peer groups. The subject of the photos, and whom it is shared with, were regarded as the most important elements of the visual communication process and contributed to perceptions of both the content and its creator. As the following extract illustrates, photos were produced with an intended audience. Through drawing upon the nature of the photo, and sharing it with a specific friend or group, the user has the potential to strengthen the bonds of relationship the photo draws upon:

Interviewer- "What sort of photos do you guys send via snapchat?"

Christine- "Silly photos"

(Laughter)

Interviewer- "What sort of silly photos would you class as a silly photo?"

Christine- "Double chin photos?! I don't know"

(Laughter)

Blake- "Random pictures"

Christine- "Random pictures. And you can draw on them and yeah"

Interviewer- "And that's more fun than doing it on Facebook, sites like that?"

(There is a unanimous chorus of "Yeah's")

Interviewer- "Why is that?"

Blake- "It's quicker"

(Interview with Blake and Christine, Ref 7)

In the extract above the girls highlight a trend that has become popular with female users of applications like Whatsapp and Snapchat. Alongside verbal messages, captured images of 'ugly' faces are shared to a number of chosen individuals within a certain group. When first encountering this practice, it seemed very much at odds with the responses received (sometimes from the same individuals) about how important they considered the judgements about their image made by their peers. Initially, the practice of sending photos to another member of their group, which displayed them in a state deemed 'embarrassing', made little sense. Despite the frequent references to how this practice was 'fun' and humorous (as it is understandably comical to see a friend posing in an abnormal state) the rationale behind it was unclear.

In these interviews it became clear that sharing these photos was an exercise which aimed to build trust amongst peers, whilst also still appealing to an approved physical aesthetic; even though the image content might seem to challenge this goal. By offering up a photo which was clearly not in keeping with traditional standards of 'femininity' (e.g. demure, carefully constructed, 'pretty') (Lakoff, 1973; Hopper, 2015) the girls involved were rebelling against these values (Bennett, 2014). By sharing these photos through a platform that allows the user to select precisely who can view them, they had created a space where they were able to explore their visual identity without worrying about social ramifications or negative judgement. Furthermore, by sending these images to another peer the photographer was displaying a level of intimacy that they felt might be reciprocated with that person; likely because of an unconscious understanding of the potential negatives that might happen should these photos be made more public. This is

also an excellent contemporary example of using specific identities, which in this case arguably demonstrates the user to be 'fun' or 'humorous', when communicating with select relationships (Goffman, 1959). Choosing to use this medium in this manner provides the sender with the opportunity to illustrate their appealing character through humour, explore group identities and strengthen social bonds. However, these 'ugly' photos were shared with the unspoken rule that these photos were for the selected recipient's eyes only:

Interviewer- "So you say its fun, why is it fun to talk to your friends like that?"

Chanel- "It's funny, like, the pictures. That's really it, I think it's funny"

Interviewer- "What sort of things do you send on it?"

Dior- "Embarrassing moments"

(Group laughter)

Interviewer- "Like what?"

Chanel- "Loads of me. They just send out pictures of me to try and embarrass me and everyone screenshots it"

Interviewer- "What do you call an embarrassing picture?"

Dior- "When I'm in my pyjamas reading and I look a mess"

Ives- "A facial (pulls a grimace as if towards a camera)"

Dior- "Yeah just horrible pictures of your face. Stuff like that"

Interviewer- "Why's that embarrassing for you, do you think?"

Chanel- "Because you look ugly"

Dior "And they can screenshot it so they have got it against you forever"

(Laughter)

(Interview with the 'Perfume Girls, Ref 5)

Therefore, these ugly selfies can enhance ties of friendship through allowing two or more individuals to witness another in a state of 'vulnerability'. The use of quotations over the last word is worth drawing attention to because although the images were reported as displaying the individual in an 'ugly' grimace, it is important to consider that they are still consciously constructed photos selected for display. It is debatable whether many of these photographs truly depict an unabashed display of a user's most embarrassing elements. On the other hand, as the extract above demonstrates, portable camera technology does increase the chance for a relative or friend to capture an image which might display an individual in a state they might not deem socially appropriate.

In the extract above, the girls express concerns over how such images are received and dealt with. Indeed this was probably the biggest issue that was frequently noted in discussion concerning these types of images. This is because selfies are judged against another distinct type of visual representation referred to as 'posey' pictures. Although the ugly selfie might be a rebellion against more 'artificially' constructed pictures, the presence of images which do conform to stereotypical beauty standards is still very high. Where the ugly selfie is sometimes a conscious effort to appear as bad as possible, the majority of profile pictures and friendship photos which were discussed were still produced with the intention of showcasing feminine appeal:

Freya- "It's easier to pull a silly face than be really posey because...it's just really awkward when..."

Carley- "Yeah it's easier than to look pretty"

Interviewer- "Do you find there is a lot of poseyness on Facebook?"

Freya- (Exasperated) "Yes"

(Laughter from girls)

(Interview with Carly and Freya, Ref 14)

Other extracts demonstrated that some girl's reportedly met as a group in order to create flattering photos. These images are then used online as part of their identity construction:

Juan- "Girls meet for do photos. I have friends, they meet for do photos. They meet in a place, they put make-up, they dress and they do photos. In a garden or something like that"

Interviewer- "Why do you think they do that?"

Anna- "It's like for popularity"

(Interview with David, Paul and Juan, Ref 1)

Consciously crafted public photos, which draw upon typical beauty standards or social connections with popular peers, are a large part of how some adolescent females support identity performances and define social status. Evidence throughout this thesis has highlighted that these images are very valuable to these adolescents because of their influence on interpersonal relations. Creating these images and sharing them is one of the key motivating factors which prompts female teens to use social networks.

However, if maintaining an approved social face is so critical, then the presence of the ugly selfie (and its potential to be shared) initially seems at odds with these aims. This is especially pertinent if we consider that the sharing of these grimaces outside of the initial 'safe' contexts, can result in the image being stored (and later liable to affect consistent identity performances) and producing a negative affect on the individual's virtual capital (Hodgkin, 2016; Frechette, 2015). This begs the question, why do these adolescent girls share these images?

The explanation lies in the context of the photos and their place in peer culture. Few girls were afraid to admit that they valued the opinion of others, nor that they spent lots of time posting and producing photos which might gain this approval. Yet as we have seen there are specific social rules which govern appropriate frequencies of use; with those in breach of these rules cited negatively as over-sharers. Alongside these values, it was often implied that the public posting of posey pictures was a bad thing, especially on Facebook.

If these photos are public productions of identity, limited in how they might be appropriately used, then the selfie (and its 'ugly' styling) could be argued to be a private representation that offers a further method to achieve the same result; but without transgressing social norms. In the previous pages, it has been demonstrated how both sets of images can be implemented to build trust and promote bonds, albeit in different ways. Though each group of pictures has its own context, they both allow the user to highlight specific aspects of self and display them to, or with, other individuals in a peer group. Whilst the selfie might build bonds between friends by relying on a shared trust that 'embarrassing moments' will be kept private, posey pictures seek to appeal to a



wider undirected audience through displaying the very best image of the user that is in keeping with larger societal values.

During the interviews, many girls worried that ugly images might change from momentary snaps to more fixed displays of self that they had not sanctioned. These fears illustrate why Snapchat's specific functionality make it the app of choice for those wishing to share embarrassing photos. Its unique communicative system decreases the possibility that such images might be seen by others outside of the right context. It offers teens who have experienced social angst provided by Facebook's permanent and public diary of the self, a method to still explore friendship boundaries and negotiate both style and identity in varying contexts.

In this study, many adolescents were concerned about private displays of self being shared alongside outward public representations because they might demonstrate awkward contradictions or social inconsistencies. Whilst Snapchat might go some way to alleviating these concerns, it is by no means exempt from them. Especially considering that the smartphones upon which it is installed can in fact undermine its time sensitive functionality, and thus its appeal, through screen capture technology. This means that ugly selfies can be both captured and then shared. The issue of online permanency and 'face-damage' is covered in **Chapter Eight**, but here it is necessary to acknowledge that a carefully constructed public profile which follows normal beauty standards and receives the associated approval, might still be jeopardized by selfies which display the same individual in a less stylised or flattering light. These selfies could provide evidence for an inconsistency of character (Goffman, 1959), or transform a private joke out of context

and into something publicly embarrassing (Frechette, 2015). During interviews it was noted that many users who shared selfies, and were proud to do so, were still keen to showcase the best of themselves via Facebook or Instagram. These users wished to be able to simultaneously demonstrate on their public and fixed page that they could conform to social values and norms, but also in private mock these very same ideas. Or, to again return to Goffman (1959), they wished to be able to use separate technologies to perform various 'appropriate' styles of identity for different audiences. Successfully achieving this goal would mean that they have the best chance of covering all social bases and demands.

Unfortunately for many users, there is no guarantee that these messages will remain momentary because of screenshot technology. Through capturing something which is intended only for a brief period of time and making it permanent, the context of the picture and its value between users is affected:

Freya- "If you send like a really bad picture and someone screenshots it, that's really annoying"

Carley- "I never send anything bad though"

Freya- "Well I send like stupid faces and really weird faces, and they get screen shotted all the time."

Carley- "Yeah I usually do that to people I trust though"

Interviewer- "So why do you pull silly faces and why do you only send them to people you trust?"

Freya- "I'll do it to my best friend and screenshot it as a joke but then like my friend did it and put it on Instagram and I was really annoyed by it because it was horrible of my face, and everyone took the micky out of me for it. And I was just like 'Whatever.'"

(Focus Group with Carly and Freya, Ref 14)

This extract further explores this problem. The story which Freya tells is an excellent example of the risks that are undertaken by individuals when they share 'silly' selfies and epitomizes similar conflicts between other adolescents. After engaging in a series of selfies with her friend, where each photo aimed to out-do the grotesque faces of the previous, Jenny felt betrayed when the recipient captured her final photo and placed it on Instagram. The friend in question thus broke the contract of trust, which is extended between both users, through shifting the nature of the image from disposable to a more permanent feature in a publicly viewed arena. This interaction demonstrates the consequences, negative and positive, that social networks can affect between interpersonal relationships. If sharing behaviours are performed in accordance with the rules of the peer group, where each actor works together to contribute to identities they are trying to express, then it has merit as a social bonding tool. On the other hand, as we have seen, it takes only one individual to change the dynamic or context of the photo, for this activity to have detrimental effects on those involved.

Importantly there were indications that for those who took it upon themselves to change the nature of these images, there were negative ramifications. When an image is captured, the sender is notified and social penalties (which reduce social capital) appear

to be enforced. In interviews that touched on these situations, teenagers spoke of people who had tried to 'keep' the photos sent to them and, when this had been discovered, had been ostracized by their peers. As the application is centered on disposable content, and the images that are constructed are created with this in mind, changing these conditions provoked an angry outcry from affected users and negatively affected the protagonist's social status:

"You can screen cap[ture] it...but it's hassle. And people know. Grief"

(Interview with Lionheart, Ref 4)

If there are negative repercussions that accompany publishing a private 'fleeting' picture onto a more viewed permanent network, it begs the question why do some teenagers choose to do this. This is especially pertinent when we consider the array of issues that have been covered in this section which explored worries over identity management and social standing. The problems that surround information control are equally relevant to those choosing to capture and share private images public. In all interviews there were only a few adolescents who would admit to this behaviour, with no one voicing that it was motivated by intent to undermine the user. Of the handful that did reveal that they had altered some images in this way, the excuse that justified the act in every instance was that it was deemed funny. The conversation between the cousins Chanel, Dior and Ives attests to both the 'embarrassing' and 'hilarious' reactions which seem to characterise these situations, yet also reveals that there is the fear of these pictures being 'held against you forever'.

Without more focused questioning it is difficult to answer exactly why, in light of the many pressures that these participants reported in regards to sculpting a socially accepted image, some teenagers choose to consciously publish pictures of their friends which had been shared in good faith. From an outside perspective such actions seemed to only increase the obstacles which adolescents had to navigate as they sought to interact successfully through these applications. By choosing to make certain grotesque selfies permanent, those who did so were introducing a worry about longer term consequences which were not initially on Snapchat. Why might some teens do this and potentially devalue a platform which had so far offered them a reprieve from previous constraints?

One answer might be that this sharing is motivated by something more than the potential humour of displaying a peer in an embarrassing light. Through sharing a message which had been sent privately, the recipient is able to both demonstrate their relationship with the sendee and influence public perceptions. As 'ugly selfies' seem to be only shared amongst users who report a close bond, posting them for others to see could be used as an indication of this relationship; much in the same way that tagging through photos on Facebook tangibly demonstrates social ties. However this seems a questionable way to flaunt your close friendships. As the evidence in this project indicates, distributing these pictures usually results in conflict or a weakening of the trust between those involved.

On the other hand, displaying ugly selfies publicly might allow an individual to display that they are in a position of power, capable of controlling or affecting other peer's identity performances. This outcome might make the act more enticing, despite the initial

conflicts from the sender, as it could indicate that they have access to poignant social information in their digital network and an ability to deploy it. Although much of the above seems callous and calculated, like so much of the identity work that is performed on a day-to-day basis, it is possible that it is enacted without much conscious thought.

Despite these issues, Snapchat's popularity could be due to its ability to decrease the likelihood that users will encounter information control issues that are prevalent on other social sites. The option to set a specific viewing time, and also receive notification of when others choose to capture your message, offers some reprieve from the social issues caused by the mass collection of data that occurs instantly, and unstopably, on Facebook. There are less chances that performances of self which are produced through the app can be later implemented in a way that undercuts current portrayals; at least not to the same degree that this has been shown to occur in other social network sites. The positive reviews it received, which contrasted with negative comments about Facebook, are arguably evidence of a group's collective decision to pay more attention to a platform that better suits their social needs. The prominence of the selfie, and 'ugly selfie', are indicative of shifts in how these teenagers conduct themselves amidst their group's normative values of beauty and appearance through subverting some expectations in a manageable form, whilst also conforming to them on another platform. There is further evidence of this when we compare how Snapchat can influence social popularity.

### **Snapchat and Popularity**

One of the most striking differences between accounts of digital behaviours on Snapchat and Facebook related to the value of the profile page. For the latter platform, the profile

is the core of the individual's experience, where everything about the self is produced or edited. This page is the starting point from which content is shared onto the local newsfeed. When establishing an account, the profile is the primary concern as it is the main information source through which others examine the user; typically, it is a collection of posts, photos and tags. It acts as a digital representation of the self, much like an avatar symbolises the user in recreational virtual gaming worlds (Taylor, 2006; Livingstone, 2013; Livingstone et al, 2013; Livingstone, 2013; Meadows, 2008).

However, when discussing Snapchat there were no mentions of similar profile displays. Nor did it seem necessary to use these profiles in order for the user to communicate with friends. Instead the focus appeared to be situated simply around messages and the conversation these facilitated amongst contacts. Whilst the user is provided with a name, there is no need to establish a permanent digital face and/or persona, which can be viewed by friends.

The closest approximation that could be compared to a profile on Facebook is the 'story' element that Snapchat users can create. This is one of the more recent additions to the software and allows individuals the opportunity to create a brief series of videos and images that are meant to capture their recent experiences. This can be viewed by any of their contacts, at any time, for a period of 24 hours from its creation. Although this means that the user does not have direct control over who views the 'Story', they do choose exactly what is visible or included. This is an interesting interpretation of the more time stable profile that is found on Facebook. This format is in keeping with Snapchat's main attraction of time sensitivity which focuses on 'of the moment' interaction, as opposed to

establishing a long term source of data which records memories and experiences. Whilst Facebook could be argued to try and create a virtual scrapbook that can be drawn upon at any point, Snapchat seems more committed to facilitating brief and byte sized excerpts of interaction which offer a snapshot of events without inundating individuals with a large volume of information. This system potentially allows users to stay up to date with peers in a more efficient and less pressured manner which does not demand that the user constantly update or edit a profile that acts as a digital stand in for their offline self. When discussing Snapchat, these mechanisms, and the lack of tension they produced in contrast to other SNS, was notable in responses:

Andy: "It's just fun, you can send silly stuff. Makes me laugh"

Valerie: "A friend made me to get it. Like made. I didn't see the point for a while but it's cool"

Andy: "When I see something I like, or want to just bug my friends with a weird face, I take a pic and send. It can get jokes. We like to just send random things that are funny."

(Selection of extracts from interviews with Andy and Valerie, Ref 11)

These comments, which are only a brief snapshot of many similar statements, represent the general vibe that was associated with Snapchat. However, despite these positive sentiments there are still contentious similarities that can be observed between Snapchat and Facebook. Indeed, there are certain aspects which relate to issues explored in previous chapters that explored how popularity was both denoted and produced.



Although interactions are based on a disposable format, and there is not a permanent profile, there are still features which are reminiscent of (and can be used as) indications of social status. Every user is rewarded with a 'hiscore' for the number of 'snaps' (pictures) that they send and receive. According to Trevor Nace, who writes an online help sheet for Snapchat, "That Snapchat score simplifies down to how often you use Snapchat, often times in the hundreds to a few thousand, but I have seen scores over 20,000 points!" (Nace, 2013). As the application is relatively new, the 'hiscore' is something that was unknown to a few of the participants. However, it is not hard to see the similarity it bears to the system of 'likes' used on Facebook to denote an audience's reaction to your upload. It has the advantage of displaying popularity to peers, by way of highlighting just how many people want to communicate with you and, in turn, can be contacted by you. This supports the theory made earlier that popularity is no longer dependant upon being part of a group, but is dictated by how many people acknowledge your actions and interest online and how this influence can be evidenced:

"You get points, don't ya, for how many people view your thing. I found out about it the other day. Looked at it was like...ah my points are a bit low...I don't care [laugh]. It's all about popularity and credibility. People do actually just sit there and go, I need to send another Snapchat. I need to send another Snapchat."

(Interview with Valerie, Ref 11)

This score is one of the very few pieces of information, detailing your interactions with others, which is shared with the user's contacts. As it is based upon the sum total of your

communications, both those sent and received, it is arguably a very visible quantification of social relations. Just as with 'likes' on Facebook, this number can function as virtual capital that directly symbolises the social capital possessed by the user. Therefore the 'hiscore' could be held in the same high esteem that 'likes' are and used as a method showcasing the user's place within their peer group.

However, it is important to note that despite its presence, there were very few mentions of it during any of the interviews; even from frequent Snapchat users. From the above passage, noted during an interview with a 16 year old female, we can see that she is keen to show that she does not care for the role of the hiscore or think it important. Future research might be able to determine whether this score has any impact upon Snapchat users in the same manner that likes have produced on Facebook. However, the scarcity of data in this project would make any such conclusions tenuous.

Although participants in this study did not mention the 'hiscore' when discussing popularity, one aspect of Snapchat which was reported was the role of 'favourite' friends. Favourites are allocated to a user based on the frequency with which they contact certain peers. The top three friends that are messaged are highlighted within the basic profile name page for all linked contacts to see. The public representation of interactions amongst individuals was responsible for the few negative comments that were received in interviews that examined Snapchat. As the extract below explores, difficulties could arise when users were discovered messaging individuals within a group they had either reported as disliking, or whom were not approved by their friends:

Olivia- “In a Snapchat sometimes you see someone in the favourites of someone, and its like you start wondering, why do they have it (referring to the favourite symbol). Why?”

Sarah- “Why do you talk to them!?”

Olivia- “Yeah! Why do you talk with them like this? So yeah that makes more conflict on Snapchat than Facebook. Because on Facebook you can’t see whose talking with who”

Sarah- “If a girl...like imagine if I see Betty, or one of my friends, she’s got a boy I like in her favourites. I don’t really don’t like it. Or someone has a friend that you hate, and she’s always like ‘Yeah I hate her as well’. But she has got her in her favourites...why do you have her?”

(The group agrees to this points)

Olivia- “That make conflict. That really make conflict”

(Interview with Sarah and Olivia, Ref 9)

In this extract the female teens describe how they feel about the favourites system on Snapchat and its influence on their friendship dynamic. They believe that the visible ranking of contacts based on the frequency of messages can have important ramifications amongst their group. As Snapchat highlights the individuals which the user contacts on a frequent basis, without offering any way to edit or prevent this information from being seen, there is the potential for the platform to both undermine identity performances and perceived relationship bonds.

Olivia and Sarah note that this can occur when friends claim to hold certain values about others in the peer group; for example when these beliefs are focused on negative representations of other females or on the attentions of the male teens. However if information is presented which indicates that (despite appearing to dislike the boy or girl in question) they are in frequent contact, then this can undermine certain identity performances within a group and encourage distrust. This is similar to how Facebook could create the same issues due to its automatic storing and sharing of data. In both cases, social problems are produced through an applications instant decision to share information about the user without their consent. On the other hand, in this extract Olivia declares that in this regard Snapchat is worse than Facebook. This is presumably because, as she points out, this sort of relationship display is not identically reproduced on Facebooks page. Nor are other users able to see who individuals speak to regularly via instant messaging.

Thus despite many of the differences that have been favourably noted by teenagers between Facebook and Snapchat, which appear to address a number of social issues, information control and its impact upon face management and friendship is still a concern. This is especially true when the platform upon which these users rely does not allow the option of editing specific interactional data that might affect public performances of identity relating to friendships or peer group constructions.

The presence of the 'hiscore' and favourite friends each bear some resemblance to problematic issues that had been noted when discussing Facebook. Currently such issues appear to have only minor consequences for the teenagers that were interviewed.

However it is plausible that given time these features might create the same social tensions that have been noted on older social network sites. On the other hand, it is also possible that thanks to the presence of time sensitive and directly controlled message services, applications like Snapchat result in a more harmonious form of social interaction that does not create conflict based on inconsistent identity performances or poorly handled information flows. If this is true then we would expect to see Snapchat continue to rise in popularity as more users flock to it at the expense of Facebook. Or we might also argue that each platform offers its own advantages that can be used, alongside other platforms, to create a mosaic array of technologies which enable the user to communicate in the method they see as being the most efficient. In order to determine which of these situations is most likely, or even if it is a combination of factors of all three, further research would need to be pursued.

## **Conclusion**

As some adolescents have reported that social communication has become difficult to execute satisfactorily via Facebook, it appears that other applications which offer solutions to these problem have become popular. A combination of time controlled sharing, user directed connection and a focus on communication that is 'of the moment', has led to Snapchat rising in popularity amongst the participants included in this study.

In this chapter the role of visual images, and the context in which they are formed, highlights social norms created by adolescents which relate directly to digital platforms and their role in the production of identity and capital. Social perceptions surrounding these photos and their use, affects the worth of the social networks that facilitate these

interactions. This has led to shifts in how the same types of images can be perceived and thus valued or used by the same groups. This is evident when exploring how the use of a selfie on Facebook is very different in terms of impact and effectiveness compared to the same image when it is applied through an app like Snapchat. With selfies on Facebook regarded as distasteful displays of self, yet widely approved on Snapchat. Differences such as this highlight how crucial context is when individuals use social networks to communicate with one another and build their sense of self. Crucially it also shows the presence of very complex and intricate social rules that must be followed, and wholly understood, in order for teenagers to successfully negotiate not only their own performances but those of their peers.

However, despite the positive approval that Snapchat received over Facebook, many teens still had access to an active Facebook account which they would regularly check into. As the last few pages suggest, even applications like Snapchat which answer many social issues concerning information control and permanency, are still unable to completely prevent people from sharing unwanted messages or storing potentially harmful data. This has perhaps led to a mosaic effect in terms of use, as social networking behaviours are spread across a variety of applications which all coalesce to form a single (yet functionally broad) digital social experience. The lack of boundaries between platforms, and the manner in which adolescent's transition from one application to another, is something which will now be explored in the conclusion of this thesis.

## **Chapter Ten: Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how social networking influences the production of identity, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and status amongst adolescents. It has discussed how teenagers negotiate gendered social norms, offline and online, and how these ideas are bound up with identity, social capital and status. Furthermore, it has established how all of these elements have been influenced by the technological affordances provided Facebook. This has led to the identification of specific digital functions which negatively impact social experiences, and encourage some users to alter their digital practices.

This concluding chapter will demonstrate how many of these themes are linked together, and the implications they have for adolescents' perceptions of self worth and social interaction. It begins with a discussion of gendered interaction and social norms, situated within the context of social networking. This offers examples of social norms which are pivotal in the generation of valuable social (Bourdieu, 1986) and virtual capital. The role of virtual capital, and its value within adolescent groups, is one of the most salient features of this thesis. Then I will summarise how digital technology can hinder online identity performances, and finish by exploring some of the strategies that adolescents have adopted in overcoming these problems. This includes a brief discussion on the life cycle of a social platform, and the long-term implications of these technologies upon adolescent development. In conjunction with the whole of this thesis, this chapter presents theories which are provided (and prompted) by the voices of teenagers themselves and offers an insight into the key areas that affect their social experiences and produced the 'Like' generation. Finally, alongside this concluding argument, this chapter

notes key areas that would benefit from further study and limitations which affected this project.

### **Banter and Masculinity**

This thesis has demonstrated that social norms which govern approved masculine and feminine values also influence the manner in which individuals negotiate their identity and group status. For male teenagers who wished to assert themselves within their peer group whilst performing 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1990, 2005), banter offered an opportunity to draw upon approved male stereotypes and manage their social status in an acceptable way. To be seen doing banter, is to be seen 'doing boy' (Buckingham, 2008) because this form of interaction draws upon a number of features that are typically identified as being masculine (i.e. confident, unafraid of conflict and able to dominate communications) (Connell, 2005; Coates, 2003; Frosh, 2001). However, even though banter tends to rely on provocation and confrontation, it still requires individuals to carefully balance controversial statements and interpersonal histories. Successfully managing what is acceptable within a group, and unlikely to cross the 'line' or prompt a negatively perceived physical confrontation, is a vital part of negotiating peer relations and masculinity. Whilst some academic works (Hawkins, 2013; Hay, 2000) have explored banter in mixed gendered communication, this thesis offers a new take on its role within male interactions and adds to the contemporary literature. It has worked to define elements which separate banter from bullying. Whilst it can be easy to mistake banter and bullying for the same interaction, as they both utilise derogatory dialogue, this project reveals important differences in how these interactions are structured and received. Bullying seeks to persistently enforce a negative judgement on a targeted



individual, who is excluded from a select group (Goldman, 2012). In these exchanges, the responses of the victim are ignored and given little value. This contrasts with the practice of banter. Unlike bullying, banter signals inclusion within a group. Success (i.e. being able to demonstrate the most masculine prowess) is determined from judgements provided by witnesses within the group. The audience judge the responses of the initiator of banter, as well as the 'target', and decide who has performed best in the exchange. Therefore, each individual involved has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their masculinity and attempt to execute a series of responses which are judged by their peers (and in turn positively affect their social standing). Humour has been noted as a key element of banter (Chapple and Ziebland, 2004; Williams, 2009). It can often be used as a means to amuse the assembled audience and display a mastery of cultural knowledge and personal boundaries. Furthermore, it can also be part of a defensive strategy that some boys use to defend their use of banter and differentiate it from bullying.

Whilst bullying involves targets outside of an approved group, banter can only function successfully when it is shared between individuals who have a vested interest in the cohesion of that group. This type of interaction is part of an 'in-group' (Goffman, 1959, 1983) effort to explore masculinity and negotiate status within the context of gendered norms, whilst strengthening interpersonal bonds. Importantly, this thesis does not deny that both banter and bullying can utilise cruel comments and that insults are still present in many exchanges. However, crucially in banter, every participant is given the chance to issue a response which is considered by the assembled audience. Furthermore, not only is it considered but also given the potential to claim success within the exchange as part of the 'in-group' (Goffman, 1959, 1983).

Therefore, many of the boys used banter as a means to manage gender and identity, because it is a practice that is in keeping with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1990, 2005) values men who act independently from the concerns of others and can dominate any given interaction. Thus for those who want to conform to this idea, using an interactional style that relies upon public displays of confrontation to display masculinity seems fitting. Performing banter allows adolescent males to explore social norms, define group status and publicly negotiate masculine identities in both offline interactions and through digital communications.

The relationship between hegemonic masculinity, banter and direct public interaction, has implications for how female adolescents seek to manage gendered norms and status demands. It was noted that girls were not linked to banter interactions like their male counterparts. Whilst some believed that they might be able to banter between close relationships, the majority stated that it was impossible for individuals to engage in the same way within the larger peer group. This was linked again to gendered social norms which dictate acceptable methods of feminine interaction. Whilst banter is part of the male repertoire and thrives on public confrontation, girls utilised a less direct method to manage status whilst maintaining a socially approved feminine identity.

### **Gossip and Femininity**

This led to a discussion of the role of gossip and stalking (Trottier, 2012) amongst female teens, and allowed this thesis to set out important distinctions between male and female social ordering practices. For the adolescent girls in this study, gossip provided an opportunity to negotiate shared group values and perform identities in the presence of

'safe' relationships. Gossip can create moralizing judgements (Tholander, 2003) between friends, and explore hypothetical situations, or social consequences, as individuals deliberate over events or behaviours (Foster, 2004; Davis & McLeod, 2003; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). In some situations, gossip can be used to create negative impressions of an individual which are then shared outside of the group (Foster, 2004). In these instances, just as banter works to undermine the credibility of an individual, gossip seeks to negatively influence public perceptions of a targeted peer. However, rather than relying upon direct exchanges, gossip spreads information about an individual who is not present and therefore unable to initially offer a defence of their actions. Banter works to include members within a community, determining status through public mockery and confrontation. Exclusion amongst boys is therefore present when individuals are not included within banter. Even though to an outsider, to be included might seem worse. On the other hand, gossip uses covert judgements about those outside of a group to strengthen ties between gossipers and to exclude targeted individuals from the in-group (Foster, 2004; Goffman, 1967). This can be detrimental to the cohesion of the larger peer community and increase social tension between members as identity performances are discredited. Many girls were keen to distance themselves from partaking in this type of behaviour. Association with it might have showed them to be in violation of acceptable feminine values (Izougu, 2009; Holgate et al, 2006; Lerner and Steinberg, 2009), which would break with socially approved female behaviour (Lakoff, 1973; McCormick, 2015; Hopper, 2015). Thus it was necessary for them to maintain a public face that portrayed them as trustworthy, sincere and kind individuals. This face allows the individual to maintain open lines of communication between the majority of their peer group (including those who have been targeted), mask gossip events which are

aimed at undermining the status of others within the group and maintain an appropriate female identity (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Dunbar, 1996, 2004; Somerfield et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2000).

Whilst these studies have covered these topics, this thesis highlights the importance of the combination of civil public face, gossip and feminine social norms. Gossip and a civil public face allows girls to juggle status and group norms, whilst conforming to 'feminine' standards. It revolves around being able to negotiate social impressions and values through collective judgements, which are shared amongst the community in a manner that marks their origin and preserves the sociable face of the gossipers. This allows girls to perform a role that is in keeping with western idealised values of femininity and how it should be performed (e.g. being demure, kind and focused on social cohesion) (Lakoff, 1973) whilst also allowing them to influence their standing within a community and explore social expectations.

### **Likes, Social Norms and Self-Worth**

Though posting content, engaging online with others and publicly acquiescing to social norms (Halpern, 2005), users were able to strengthen interpersonal relations and receive positive approval from others. Sharing images that highlighted relationships or traditional beauty aesthetics allowed adolescent girls to perform femininity and receive a signal of acceptance from others online. Likewise, boys who demonstrated knowledge of popular cultural ideas alongside expressions of masculinity (e.g. through memes and tagging) had the same chance to receive group approval. Social networks aid in the reproduction of offline gendered perceptions. There are links between the production of digital content

that negotiates gender and the creation of virtual capital. This body of work therefore adds to contemporary studies (Sherman et al, 2016; boyd, 2008) on digital networking and social approval.

In the same way that conforming to shared values, or group rules, can strengthen interpersonal bonds and facilitate the creation of social capital within a community (Bourdieu, 1986, 1980) following these values in a demonstrable manner online can result in the production of virtual capital. This thesis, adding to work that explores various forms of capital in the online world (Trottier, 2012; Sherman, 2016; Julien, 2014), has defined virtual capital as social approval denoted by specific symbols. Within the context of Facebook virtual capital is symbolised through likes. However, there are a number of others forms which have been noted in relation to other sites (i.e. hearts for Instagram and the hiscore for Snapchat). Although this thesis has concentrated on Facebook and likes, it presents a framework which is suited to any form of digital attention can be situated within the following argument.

This thesis, and this concluding chapter, has pointed to the important role of norms in constructing interpersonal bonds, which in turn facilitate the creation of potential resources between individuals. Through this method of network building and social management, capital is both deployed and made available for people within specific relationships or groups (Bourdieu, 1986, 1980). Drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of capital, this work has demonstrated how digital networks now provide a visual marker of the strength of interpersonal relationships within a network and also act as a symbolic marker of how adept a user is at negotiating prominent social norms or values; which are

portrayed through the content they post. This argument is evidenced by the volume of responses received that indicated the powerful authority online affirmation held for many adolescents, how it exerted a strong influence over their self-esteem and their digital behaviour and crucially how virtual capital was perceived by the peer community as a whole.

Many adolescents believed that their social worth was defined by the amount of visible attention that they could generate through online platforms. This prompted many of their online actions to be conducted in line with perceived expectations they believed they might receive from others which would produce negative social sanctions or reflect badly upon their identity performances and capital (Elder-Vass, 2012). Some posts might be deliberately crafted to appeal to favourable cultural ideas, or edited to showcase the user in the best possible light, or even removed altogether if certain displays were deemed unsuccessful. Traditional theories that explore teenage development posit that many social activities are often motivated by a desire to increase peer status and gain approval or popularity (McGurk, 1991; Fine, 1981; Byrne, 1971). We might argue then that social networks are simply a further extension of this practice and provide another means by which users can increase their capital, through performing appropriate identities that will produce or strengthen group bonds (Putnam, 2000). However, this thesis argues that these social platforms have in fact altered how capital is perceived and influenced its production.

Before the integration of digital networking into modern life, popularity (or status) could be defined within the social consciousness by an individual's interpersonal relationships

or their display of culturally valued items (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986, 1990). Shoes, clothes, hobbies or houses were indicators of status within a community. However, although these items and relationships symbolised an individual's social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990), ultimately there was no tangible definition of the amount of capital generated. For many adolescents, this is no longer true. Virtual capital now allows users to gauge how well a peer group regards their performances of self-expression. Likes, or hearts, offer a tangible representation of how much attention a user might gain from posting content related to a new acquisition, a holiday or an important life achievement. Thus, whilst shoes, clothes and hobbies are still important elements in the creation of cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990), these material items are perhaps no longer the sole focus of teenagers' efforts to accrue status. Instead, they might also act as a vehicle through which teens can create their online identity representations by drawing upon the cultural value (or associations) that these resources provide.

Due to the numerical and tangible nature of likes, virtual capital produces an audience which is both definable and symbolic of the user's self worth. This means that if a teenager can successfully master social norms and display them online (i.e. through producing beauty pictures or friend based posts which draw on relationships) then they are able to produce a positive reaction from peers which can be used as evidence of their value and acceptance within a group. As traditional literature has stated that popularity is often a key desire in adolescent development (McGurk, 1991; Fine, 1981; Byrne, 1971), it is little wonder that many users constantly seek to remain active on social platforms if

they can reap such rewards. It can provide a powerful sense of acceptance, and reinforce feelings of belonging (Sherman, 2016).

However, this thesis has shown that producing a large volume of virtual capital is neither simple nor easy. Individuals must be able to master their identity expressions both offline and online, as well as manage their friendship ties. Both of these goals require a thorough grasp of information management and a reflexive consideration of how some actions might create unwanted future consequences. Although social networks are capable of altering an individual's perceived social status positively, this study had noted that they can also create negative complications. As technology has "set expectations about speed" (Turkle, 2011, 149) it has shifted the manner in which data is controlled and viewed. In the context of Facebook, a large volume of information is automatically shared and stored. This means that users, and people whom are granted access to their profile, are able to review past content at any point. Extracts in this study have highlighted the problems that can arise when past information is compared against present performances. Inconsistent evidence can suggest that a user is not who they claim to be (Goffman, 1959). This can happen when peers discover past representations (through the use of the timeline feature) or when users post content by mistakes.

Slips in consistent presentation can result in awkward social tensions. If 'errors' are revealed which relate specifically to the user, then they might encounter ridicule and public judgement because of their failure to produce a cohesive 'face' (Goffman, 1959). This was noted in **Chapter Seven**, in regards to the club promoter whose masculinity was questioned when it was discovered he had used a 'feminine' beauty product. In this



instance, a photo posted online was reviewed by peers at a later date and used as evidence of his mistake. On the other hand, poor information control between users can also result in a breakdown of cohesive interpersonal communication. New digital communication platforms allow for messages to be sent instantly and in large capacities. This has increased the opportunity for users to make interaction errors which might have otherwise only been made face-to-face. This includes sharing private information with unintended audiences or revealing thoughts which can jeopardise specific identity presentations that relate to certain relationships. Evidence of these problems were noted in **Chapter Six**, when exploring the carefully constructed nature of successful gossip, and again in **Chapter Eight**, which noted the complications that technology can create when trying to create a successful digital social profile that does not contain any contradictory identity information.

### **Overwhelming Oversharing**

Another common theme which emerged when discussing Facebook, focused on the volume of information that users were confronted with. In order for users to produce a public profile that is aligned with current trends and values, and therefore might produce virtual capital, they must ensure that they are abreast of current social developments (both within their own peer group and wider society). Concerns over missing out were part of why many adolescents felt a growing resentment towards Facebook. This problem is exacerbated by Facebook's tendency to collate and share vast amounts of data from every available 'friend' and potential network contact (Trottier, 2012). At any given point, users can witness a dizzying array of information taken from a wide sample of their local online community. Whilst an individual may want to easily view content that relates to

important social developments, their newsfeed can instead consist of information that they would consider irrelevant, but which must be analysed for useful content. The findings in this thesis support work conducted by Livingstone (2009), which highlights that when users complain about privacy settings, there is a more pressing underlying concern. In these cases, users are not complaining about privacy but instead are annoyed that they no longer seem to be able to fully control the flow of information. When discussing Facebook in this thesis, discussions often featured worries that individuals were not able to manage content effectively, in regards to the information that they shared and also viewed.

### **The Future of the 'Like' Generation**

With all of this in mind, what does this mean for contemporary adolescents? If social networks offer teenagers an opportunity to critically influence their perceived self worth within the peer group, how do these complications affect these goals? Whilst social platforms can provide an opportunity for positive identity representation and relationship building, they appear to simultaneously hinder these outcomes. The participants within this study were keenly aware that content they posted would be stored, and potentially shared at a later date. On top of this worry, adolescents knew that it was likely that their peers would use this data as a resource to form critical social judgements (Trottier, 2012). They possessed this knowledge because they themselves admitted to indulging in the same activity (Trottier, 2012). This means that users must be able to master the information they share and use, when producing identity and interpersonal relationships, in order to create a public face that has the least chance of undermining their status. Virtual capital, which was for many teens the most important element in their social

experience (Sherman, 2016), is therefore almost constantly under threat from mistakes that the user might make (in identity performance and when navigating the available array of social data) and attempts from peers to challenge these performances (as we have noted in banter and gossip). This increased pressure has led to many teens feeling overwhelmed at the demands that are placed upon them, in regards to having to manage identity (Turkle, 2011) and social norms in order to achieve popularity.

These requirements are challenging for any individual, young or old, but perhaps are particularly significant when we reference traditional literature (Fine, 1981; Jackson et al, 1993; McGurk, 1992; Forrester, 1992; Erikson, ??) that explores teenage development pre-social networking. Adolescence has typically been defined as a time period in which teenagers learn to socialise and become effective adult communicators, within an environment that bears little relevance to wider society or will not impact their future (Fine, 1981). This period offers them the chance to make mistakes, explore social boundaries, and test out identities without facing the same accountability as adults might (Jackson, 1995). Except now, with social networking, this is perhaps no longer true. There are many examples of content posted by teenagers which has become public knowledge and created long lasting damage to reputations and prospects. Whilst errors in identity can present challenges within a peer group which teens might worry over, there are certainly far greater problems which might transpire should 'childish' digital outbursts follow users into adulthood; an outcome which is far more likely thanks to digital permanency. It is also worth noting that some of these concerns are not unique to teenagers, as adults have similarly encountered the problems produced by social networking's ability to undermine face performances. However, crucially, if likes and

hearts are how young individuals now create their sense of self worth, not being able to produce a significant volume of approval might specifically harm adolescent self-esteem. It is plausible that this issue might be a contributing factor to the rise of adolescent depression. Recent reports have indicated that modern teens feel the same levels of anxiety and stress as adults employed in stressful jobs (Harris Interactive, 2013). Although such statistics should be evaluated in light of the fact that we do not possess any data testing for the same issues in previous generations and perhaps adolescents have always been prone to the same levels of stress.

However, this study calls into question some of the claims that relevant previous literature makes in its examination of adolescence and development, and seeks to compare these ideas within a modern context. If the work in this thesis is indicative of trends within wider society, then further study is required that examines just how valid our traditional conception of teenage development is in light of the influences that digital social networks produces. For some individuals within this study, despite their relatively young age, they were required (if they wished to successfully 'fit' into their peer group) to master concepts that most adults would likely still find challenging. Does this mean that the young generation are no longer able to freely experiment with 'self' in the same way? Or provided with an environment into which these tentative first attempts at social identity are unlikely to impact their future development?

Furthermore, has their increased attention to the production of digital validation resulted in a continued fascination with the estimations of others? Is this preventing many from resolving the tensions Erikson's writes about in his writing on traditional development?

Are we encouraging this behaviour by commercialising the role of the social influencer and rewarding its socially manipulative power? Will this have a long-term impact upon the overall development of self and create an entire generation of individuals who always require the input of their peers through digital validation are unable to totally feel comfortable in their own individual identity? As much as this thesis has attempted to provide answers to some of these questions, and has demonstrated that there is a real difference in the environments and pressures that the adolescents of today must negotiate, we will only really begin to understand the impacts of this technology over the following decades.

We must also consider how these conclusions influence the validity of moral panics which focus upon adolescence and social networking. This thesis has demonstrated that many teenagers, like adults, are worried about information privacy and interaction safety. This undermines contemporary ideas that portray young users to be naive or reckless in their digital pursuits. Rather than focusing on these ideas, such panics might be better suited to establishing answers to the questions above and acknowledging ideas, derived from teen social experiences, which are directly related to the emotional and mental wellbeing of adolescent individuals. These are explorations which future research should pursue.

### **Social Media, Social Tools**

However, these worries do not mean that the adolescents within this study were without methods of dealing with these problems. Whilst Facebook was reported as the main culprit in creating these issues, other platforms appeared to offer a reprieve from these pressures. Newer applications which simplify the varied functionality Facebook provides,

through focusing purely on pictures (like Instagram) or offering information systems which are easier to control and have less chance of permanency, capitalise on these problem areas. The participants in this study appeared to instinctively gravitate towards these technologies and identify them as communicative methods which might allow them to better interact with their social world. This suggests that teenager's methods of social communication cannot be defined by singular platforms. Whilst academics (Steinfeld et al, 2008; boyd, 2008; Turkle, 1996; Kafai et al, 2010) have been keen to differentiate between offline and online communication, and categorise specific interaction as being bounded by certain sites, it seems much more likely that for many adolescents, social communication is an amalgamation of many systems. The rise of platforms that allow for easier information control, an easier demonstration of approved norms and better strengthening of personal bonds, supports the notion that teenager's cherry pick the tools they need. Despite Facebook being reported as being less popular, the statistics in this study show that it is still very much used. Although it might have become less of an active site, it is still certainly part of the adolescent social toolbox.

Furthermore, this research shows that newer technologies have the potential to also fall prey to the same problems that Facebook has encountered. For example, Snapchat's installation on devices that undermine one of its key selling points (i.e. 'screenshotting' changing the fleeting nature of messages). However, regardless of these problems, each of these platforms offer elements that are useful to adolescents in their drive to create virtual capital. Conversations between teenagers are not defined by platforms. Instead their interactions are a continuous flow of many different styles of communication. Contemporary teens draw upon various technologies, cultural ideas and systems in their

efforts to create a valued sense of self and mark out a space for themselves within their peer group. As newer technologies try and keep up with the demands of their users and increase their popularity, some appear to make the same mistakes as their predecessors. The draw of Snapchat for many participants was its original simplicity, which is now being eroded by constant updates and additions to its service. During the course of this project, a number of alterations were made to this platform. Newer versions allow users to review data again after a first occasion, allow advertisers to directly reach users via their phones and include fresh elements that offer further elements to the communication experience. Whilst it is impossible for this study to remark upon how these alterations will have affected users, if the influence of permanency on teenage interaction is valid for platforms other than Facebook, it is clear that Snapchat might have damaged its own attraction. This suggests that new social networking platforms have a life cycle that we have yet to see play out. Currently most sites enter the public consciousness, gain attention through a new innovation, become commonplace and then partly redundant as issues crop up within that service. This leads to users adopting newer technology that capitalises on these areas. It remains to be seen exactly what will happen to Facebook over the coming years and how newer generations will react to it. However if the research in this study is any indication, it seems plausible that users will continue to decrease how often they spend actively engaging with peers through Facebook and that it might eventually be relegated to the same past arena as MySpace (Robards, 2012).

### **Limitations of this Study**

One of the key drawbacks of conducting research that explores contemporary technology, is that the conclusions that are made here might be out of date with the

technologies they refer to. Indeed, whilst fresh research should explore the areas that this study has not been able to, any form of sociological exploration in digital platforms may suffer from the same issues.

Alongside issues presented by the combination of technology and social research, there are also other limitations which affect this study. Due to problems regarding access (covered in **Chapter 5**) the sample populations of boys and girls are unfortunately skewed. As the majority of school-based sessions took place within an all-boys establishment, this means that there is a male bias. Despite conscious effort to try and address them when speaking with girls, and ensuring that lots of 'female-focused' data was gathered, this potentially affects the depth and insight regarding some female interactional processes. Added to this are the inherent issues of male researcher trying to explore an intimate female social arena, especially a male who was ten years the senior of some female subjects. To remedy these issues, a team of mixed gendered researchers could explore the same topic areas, but in groups of varying genders. This would limit a single gender bias in both the research and analysis stages. Finally, if access problems could be overcome, and successful links were to be forged with local communities and parents, this study would benefit from a longitudinal aspect. This would allow for greater insight into how the issues discussed here are influenced by time and continued adolescent development. If a group of adolescents could be studied as they progressed through their early teens, within the context of digital networking, we would be able to better understand the theoretical life cycle of certain platforms and answer some of the questions this conclusion has posed.



This thesis has detailed the practices of the 'Like' generation and attempted to convey how modern adolescents actually feel about their complex relationship with social technology. It offers conclusions that are guided by the perspectives of these individuals, rather than following concepts that are adult oriented. By offering teenagers the opportunity to voice their worries, we have been able to explore perceptions surrounding social norms and online social affirmation, gendered interactions and stereotypes and even detailed the strategic decisions that users make when considering which platforms are suited to their ever-changing social needs. Despite the limitations noted above this thesis offers an insightful and original glimpse snapshot into the experiences of contemporary teens that draw upon digital networks as means to navigate their social world, and the strong value they place on digital identity and virtual capital. Thus this work provides a strong foundation for further research into how technology influences adolescents' online practices and productions of identity, (virtual) capital and gender.

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**Appendix 1- Logical and Ethical Considerations  
Letter**

<b>Researcher:</b>	<i>John Joseph Whittle</i>
<b>Contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk">j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk</a>
<b>Supervisors:</b>	Dr Dave Elder-Vass Dr David Buckingham
<b>Supervisor contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk">D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk</a> D.Elder-Vass@lboro.ac.uk

*Logistical and Ethical Considerations for Secondary Schools- 2014*

**John Whittle – PhD Loughborough Student**

Ethical Considerations

The project explores the interactions and online behaviours of individuals who are between the ages of 11 to 16; as these students are not aged 18 and above, the British Sociological Association (BSA) deems them to be a vulnerable party. Before being able to take part in any aspect of the research, Guardians and Parents must first sign a consent form which, having reviewed and accepted the terms of the project, enables their children's participation. These forms are used to prove that the study is conducted under the strict ethical guidelines placed upon it by Loughborough University's Ethical Board. All considerations are used to ensure that the individuals who take part are not placed in positions of risk, and can enjoy and benefit from the experience.

Due to this process, it is necessary for the consent forms to be issued to parents and then re-collected. In some cases, schools have been keen to skip this and allow a class to take part without informing parents. We advise against this as it can create problems when parents and Guardians feel that they are not involved in the process, and tensions might arise between the school, researcher and parents; which can in turn cause issues for the students who want to take part.

The necessary forms will be issued to the relevant members of staff within the school, so they can be reviewed and- if necessary- modified to suit the individual nature of the educational environment. Should you have any queries or amendments about these documents, please contact the researcher on the contact details provided.

Logistical Considerations

As the number of participants involved can vary depending on the responses received from parents, it can seem hard to plan when the interviews take place without

causing disruption to lessons and other commitments. During our preliminary tests in schools located within the East Midlands, we have used separate guidelines which helped minimise interruptions to the school day. These are only guiding principles and can be change to suit the needs of the school timetable and the time that is available. They have been split into the following eventualities:

*If there is a positive response from many parents:*

If many students are keen to take part, and have the permission of their parents, then co-ordinating the timetables of these individuals can be problematic. In these situations, if the students are located in similar form groupings or study sessions, we have used these times to conduct a single focus group (lasting from 30-45 minutes) which explores the issues at hand. When students have been spread over varying groups we have instead used lunch time sessions or available free periods. If there is a particular group that the school believes could benefit from the research, and they have the necessary permission, we have always interviewed these students as a priority.

*If only a few students are cleared to take part:*

In the situations where a small group of students were able to participate, we utilised any free time they were able to spare before the start of the school day or just after school had finished. This ensured that there was no disruption to their lessons and could be scheduled for a period when the individual was happy to take part. In some cases, interviews were conducted during lunch breaks or PSHE lessons.

The above sections provide details in dealing with the two extremes of planning, according the volume of responses that are produced. When a 'moderate' number of students are able to take part, the strategies used are often a mixture of the aspects mentioned above, which best suit and support the school.

#### Other considerations

The researcher will use a voice recorder when conducting the focus group, to collect the data for analysis. Groups of between 4-12 have been found to work best, as they allow all individuals a chance to speak within the sessions, without being over ruled by other participants who might have more to say. The study does not discount the voices of teachers and teaching assistants, who are welcomed to participate and add their own experiences of social networking in separate sessions.

We hope this sheet has helpful in tackling the logistical issues that can arise when considering whether to take part in this PhD Research. Should you have any questions, please contact the researcher as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time.

**Appendix 2- Project Adult Information Letter**

<b>Researcher:</b>	<i>John Joseph Whittle</i>
<b>Contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk">j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk</a>
<b>Supervisors:</b>	Dr Dave Elder-Vass Dr David Buckingham
<b>Supervisor contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk">D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk</a> D.Elder-Vass@lboro.ac.uk

**School:**

**Head master:**

**Dear Parent/Guardian,**

I am a PhD student at Loughborough University studying how children are using Facebook to talk and interact with their friendship groups. By exploring how social networking features in talking to their peers, both on the computer and outside of it, and contributes to sharing information, I am hoping to learn more about the long term effects of virtual communication.

In order to do this, I would like the opportunity to interview children in Year 6 who are willing to participate, offering them the chance to talk about their online networking habits and demonstrate how they use social networking. These interviews will be conducted by me, along with the aid of the school. The study does not encourage the use of social networking, nor require a child to have an online profile in order to participate as Interviews would also be conducted with those who do not have a Facebook account. Furthermore, although Facebook attempts to exclude children under 13 it is not illegal for them to use the service and we are aware that many do.

If you are happy to allow your child to participate, please could you complete the slip provided and return it to the school. There will be a minimum of one interview, which should take between half an hour to forty-five minutes. Your child does not need to bring anything, and can opt out of the study at any point should they, or you, feel uncomfortable or unhappy. All the data that is collected will be treated under the rules stated by the Data Protection Act 1998, and anonymised for the safety of your child.

If you would also like to be involved in the study, and express your own thoughts on social networking and how your child is using it, then please fill in the options given on the form. Any input you are willing to provide will be greatly appreciated.

If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact me on the address provided above. Thank you for your time,

Yours Faithfully  
John Whittle



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Research Reply Slip

**Name of Child:** .....

**Name of Parent:** .....

**Class:** .....

**Please Circle the Appropriate Response**

1. I agree / do not agree for my child participate in the whole research  
*If the above response is 'agree' then please move onto number 4.*

2. I agree / do not agree for my child to be interviewed

3. I agree / do not agree for my child to demonstrate their online  
behaviour

4. I would be agree / do not agree to take part in an interview session

5. I would prefer to be contacted by:

Phone: .....

Email: .....

Letter:.....

*If the above response is 'agree' then you will contacted by the researcher  
to discuss possible times for the interview that suit you.*

**Thank you for your time.**

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**Appendix 3- Project Child Information Letter**



<b>Researcher:</b>	<i>John Joseph Whittle</i>
<b>Contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk">j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk</a>
<b>Supervisors:</b>	Dr Dave Elder-Vass Dr David Buckingham
<b>Supervisor contact email:</b>	<a href="mailto:D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk">D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk</a> D.Elder-Vass@lboro.ac.uk

A Study On



**Child Participant Information Sheet**

**What's it about?**

I am doing a project that is looking at how you use Facebook! I would like the chance to talk to you about how you chat to your friends and keep in touch with them. I want to know all about how you post on their profile walls, send links and share music, and what you think about Facebook.

**Who am I? And why am I doing this?**

I am a student at Loughborough University and this is part of my final project, which I get help with from my teachers who are in the box above. But now I need your help as well!

**What if you say that you want to take part, but then change your mind? Can you stop helping?**

Yes! After you have read this sheet and asked any questions, I will ask you to complete an Informed consent form, but if at any time you want to leave the project then just let me know and you can, and you won't be asked why. This isn't a piece of school work, and you don't have to take part.

**What if you change your mind again, and want to get involved after leaving?**

Then you just contact me, or a teacher, let them know and you will be allowed straight back into the project.

**What will you have to do? And where do you need to go?**

All you have to do is talk to me about what you do on Facebook, who you chat to and how you feel about it, for as long as you would like to. Plus, if you're happy too, then you will have the chance to go on Facebook for a bit and show me your profile and your favourite things. The interview will happen in school/at home and you don't need to bring anything other than yourself.

**What if you don't have a Facebook account? Do you need to get one? Can you still be involved?**

You do not have to have a Facebook account to take part, and I am not encouraging you to get one. You are just as important to talk to, and I would still like to know how you chat to your friends, keep in touch and what you think about talking to each other online.

**How long will it take?**

As long as you are happy to keep talking to me.

**If you have any questions about this, who should you talk to?**

You can talk to one of the teachers/parents who are involved, or get an adult to email me on the address provided in the box on page one.

**What if you are not happy with the research? Who do you talk to?**

If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact the Mrs Zoe Stockdale, the Secretary for the University's Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee:

*Mrs Z Stockdale, Research Office, Rutland Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU.*

*Tel: 01509 222423.*

*Email: [Z.C.Stockdale@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:Z.C.Stockdale@lboro.ac.uk)*

*The University also has a policy relating to Research Misconduct and Whistle Blowing which is available online at*

*[http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/Whistleblowing\(2\).htm](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/Whistleblowing(2).htm).*



**Appendix 4- Project Frequently Asked Questions Letter**  
**Project Information Sheet and Frequently Asked Questions**

What is the point of the study overall?

The main aim of this project is to try and gain a better understanding of how social networking interacts with young children, and specifically how it is used in maintaining or creating friendships during the important pre-teenage years. If it is successful then it will hopefully provide a more detailed insight into how social networking has impacted the ways in which current and future generations communicate with one another.

Why are you researching this age range?

The study is examining children who are aged around thirteen and below because it is at this time that many children move from Year 6 to Year 7. This is a very important time for moving on and maturing, and it provides a unique opportunity to explore how new friends are being made, and old relationships kept going, with the use of social networking.

How long will it take?

This is really up to you (The Guardian) and your child. Each session should last anywhere between 30-45 minutes and has been created to be as enjoyable and interactive as possible. If, after the first session, you and your child are happy to take part again (to explore further issues at a later date and examine how new friendships are being formed over time) then more sessions of the same length would be brilliant.

What will my child have to do?

During the session your child will be asked to pick from a number of activities and worksheets that will explore how they make friends and maintain these relationships, in the context of social networking. The answers they give will be discussed and recorded. If they are happy to do

so, then they will be asked to show the researcher their Facebook profile and talk through it.

Does it just have to be my child who takes part in a single session?

Not at all. If any friends would like to take part, with the permission of the relevant Guardian, then that would be great too. This might reduce any nerves children sometimes have at the start of research situations and give them confidence in the presence of their friends. However, this is also not vital, as all worksheets and activities in the session have been created for both individuals and groups.

What if my child doesn't have a profile, can they still get involved?

Yes, providing that they have other friends who use Facebook or have encountered issues with other peers who social network, then it would be great to speak to those children as well, and ask them about their friendships.

If you are under thirteen is it illegal to have a Facebook account?

Although Facebook's own terms and conditions do mean that children under thirteen should not have a Facebook account, it is not currently within the UK- against the law to do so. Should a child own an account and not be the correct age then it is within the rights of the owners of Facebook, as it is their responsibility and not the users, to resolve the matter by perhaps removing that individual's access.

Is this study encouraging Facebook use by those who are under-age?

This study does not require, nor does it encourage, children to have a Facebook account. However we are very aware that many under-thirteen's do possess a profile and it is these children that we would like to speak to and interview.

If I am a parent who has an under-thirteen child with a Facebook profile, will my name be recorded or will I get in trouble?

**No.** All data, participants and guardians will be totally anonymised and kept completely confidential in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection

Act. The studies aim is not about reporting anyone for mis-use, but instead about trying to help children.

### What if I would like to remove my child from the study part way through?

If you (or your child) would like to stop participating then all you have to do is inform the researcher and he will stop the interview process. Should you wish for your previous contributions to be deleted then they will be. However, if at any point you would like to take part again, then please contact the researcher and he will be happy for you to rejoin the study.

### Can I take part?

Yes. It would be brilliant if you (Guardian/Parent/Teacher) would like to take part in an interview and share your experiences about children and social networking. This can be conducted before or after the interviews with children, at a time convenient to you.

### Who is conducting the study?

My name is John Whittle and I am a PhD student at Loughborough University. I have received a full disclosure CRB check, which will be shown to you at the start of each meeting. My supervisors are Dr Dave Elder-Vass and Dr David Buckingham (contact details are given below).

### What if I have Further Questions?

If there is anything that is not covered here, or you wish to enquire about a point in more detail, please contact me at [j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:j.whittle@lboro.ac.uk) My supervisors can be contacted at [D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:D.Buckingham@lboro.ac.uk) and [D.Elder-Vass@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:D.Elder-Vass@lboro.ac.uk)

**Appendix 5- Social Network Survey**



*Loughborough Grammar School  
PhD Survey Loughborough University  
John Whittle*

Name: .....

Age: .....

Class: .....

School:.....

**1) Rate these social networking sites in order of preference:**  
(1=most preferred/5=least preferred)

- Facebook \_\_\_
- Snapchat \_\_\_
- Instagram \_\_\_
- Twitter \_\_\_
- Whatsapp \_\_\_
- Other (Please specify) \_

**2 )Rate these social networking sites in order of how much time you spend using them:**  
(1=most time spent/5=least time spent)

- Facebook \_\_\_
- Snapchat \_\_\_
- Instagram \_\_\_
- Twitter \_\_\_
- Whatsapp \_\_\_
- Other (Please specify) \_

**3) Please write three keywords you associate with Facebook:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**4) Please write three keywords you associate with Snapchat:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**5 ) How often do you experience conflict whilst using Facebook:**

*Please Circle a response*

Often Sometimes Rarely Not at all

**6) How often do you experience conflict whilst using Snapchat:**

*Please Circle a response*

Often Sometimes Rarely Not at all

**7) When keeping in touch with friends, in what order would you use these platforms :**

(1=most preferred/5=least preferred):

- Phone call \_\_\_\_\_
- Text Message \_\_\_\_\_
- Email \_\_\_\_\_
- Facebook \_\_\_\_\_
- Whatsapp \_\_\_\_\_
- Snapchat \_\_\_\_\_
- Instagram \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**8) How long have you had a Facebook profile for:**

*Please Circle a response*

I don't have one. <6months 6months-1 year 1 year- 3 year 3 years>

**9) Do you use your Facebook profile...than you did when you first did.:**

*Please Circle a response*

More often Just as much Very little Not at all.

**10) Do you prefer to access social networking platforms via:**

*Please circle one*

Smartphone/Iphone Tablet Laptop Desktop PC Gaming Device

## Appendix 6- Interview Guide Sheet

### Interview Guide sheet- Talk

- **How long do you spend on Facebook, per day, on average?**
- **How do you feel when you are online?**
- *(If positive)* What aspects of Facebook make it an activity that you want to engage in?
  
- **How many friends do you have on Facebook?**
- **What does the term friendship mean to you?**  
How do you define when someone is not your friend anymore?
- **Does this definition apply to everyone you are Facebook friends with?**  
If no, how does it differ?
  
- **Who is your best friend/s?**  
Why do you consider them to be your best friend?
- **Who do you not like in your year?**  
Why?
  
- **Do you talk more to boys or girls online?**  
Is it easier to talk to the opposite sex online?
  
- **Do you have any friends who do not use Facebook?**  
If yes, why do they not use it?  
Do you think they would like to?  
How does this affect your friendship?
  
- **Do you ever think about not having a Facebook account?**  
If yes, why?  
Do you think that not using Facebook would affect the relationships you have with your peers?
  
- **When meeting someone new for the first time, describe how you would go about making friends with them?**  
How do you feel about making friends?  
Does social networking figure as an important part of this process?  
Does it help you make friends?
  
- **Have you met strangers after talking to them online?**
  
- **Do you only friend people who you have met face to face?**
  
- **What is your criteria for friending someone?**

- **Does Facebook help you to stay friends with people you might not see a lot?**
- **Does Facebook help you to stay friends with people you see everyday?**
- **How do you prefer to connect with your friends when your not face to face? (i.e Facebook chat, wall post or other technological mediums)**
- **Does Facebook cause problems amongst friends?**  
If so, how?  
How often would you say that social networking is brought up in arguments?
- **Are you aware of what gossip is?**  
Does this occur within your year group or set of friends?  
Is gossip something happens more face to face, or during online activities?  
Does Facebook ever play a big role in how gossip spreads?  
Have you ever experienced an occasion where gossip has been spread about you, or you have been a part of talking about someone else?
- **What do you think about online bullying?**  
What would you constitute as online bullying?  
Have you ever had any experience with this?
- **Is there competition to be popular in your year?**  
Does social networking play a role in this?
- **When you are logged on, what activities do you engage in?**  
Do you only do these activities with your friends that you described earlier?  
Are these friends based on your online or offline activities, or a mixture of both?
- **What do you think people will think when they look at your profile?**  
Does someone else's opinion about your profile matter to you?  
If so, why?  
Does someone else's opinion affect your own opinion about yourself?  
Are you confident online?
- **How do you feel about the timeline feature now used by Facebook?**  
Do you have any issues with people being able to see past actions or messages you may have created?  
How do you feel about these past messages?  
Are they still an important part of your profile?





**Appendix 7- Interview Details**

ADD IN FOLLOWING NOTES: 1) CLASS DESCRIPTIONS ARE BASED OFF AUTHOR PERCEPTION AND CONTEXTUAL INFO 2) ETHNICITY IS ASCRIBED USING IDENTITY CODE											
									<b>Interview Information</b>		
<b>Ref</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Yr. Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Ethnicity/Religion</b>	<b>Personal Description</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Notes</b>	

1	Anna	14	10	Female	Middle	Mediterranean	Thoughtful and considered in her answers. She rarely directly interacted with the boys in the group, but politely listened and responded when spoken with.	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	Anna was easily able to speak by the other boys within the group, and listened to with some reverence. As the only girl, she appeared to carry her own weight on 'female' matters, but was also hesitant sometimes to offer opinions on topics that the boys had become excited by. Over the course of the session it became clearer that David, and perhaps the others, were in awe/enamoured by her.
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	David	12	9	Male	Upper	Caucasian	The youngest of the group, David displayed a lot of youthful energy and he was often quick to supply answers without perhaps considering their repercussions. Throughout the session he alternated between seeking approval first from Anna, and then from his fellow male peers.			
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	Juan	13	8	Male	Middle	Mediterranean	Juan was confident and outspoken, placed usually as the male leader of the group. Many of his expressions and answers were declarative, and he tended to stick with views and ideas that he felt he could defend. When drawn by new conversations or provoked by alternative ideas, he would quickly find a way to return to safer ground.			
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		Paul	13	9	Male	Middle	Caucasian	The quietest member of the group, Paul would normally only speak in order to support Juan or echo ideas that others had ventured. Although not outwardly shy, he was certainly hesitant to take a leading role in any conversation, and was more comfortable with acting as a third party to the interaction.			
2		Mark	13	8	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Outspoken and, during the session, prone to engaging in banter with his fellow peers	Lester Grammar	Focus Group	Due to the age range of this group, and the fact that all the boys were together in one

	Steven	12	8	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Steven didn't vocally engage on his own with the researcher, but generally (through body language and small signs of agreement) supported the opinions of his friends.			room, there was a lot of exciting chatter which had to be negotiated. The interview setting, which they had not experienced before, and the presence of a new male figure resulted in a number of tangential outbursts. This shifted the dynamic of the focus group, and made it tricky for the researcher to create a fluid and open conversation. On a number of occasions, in order to keep the boys on topic, a more authoritative
	George	13	8	Male	Lower	Caucasian	George was able to voice his own points of view and provide some justification for them. He often seemed keen to really make the researcher understand the perspectives of his peers, and used an older tone to do so. He was one of the more mature			

								members of his group.			tone had to be employed which, whilst useful for immediate moderation, might have impacted the quality of some responses.
3	Dash	15	10	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Dash was a stocky, bright sports playing teen boy who chose his name after the Incredibles character. He seemed to subscribe to many of the hegemonic masculinity ideals noted in this thesis, but also appeared to 'tone' these down due to context of the focus group. In	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	One of the first focus groups conducted at Rougard, which took place within a morning break session. After an initial nervous start, the participants relaxed into a fluid conversation. The girls especially seemed to enjoy speaking and contributing, displaying a	

								conversation he focused solely on the interviewer and teen girls, ignoring or contradicting Michael, who was of a diminutive stature to him.			close friendship that often supported or provoked intimate details. The boys did not appear to be friends, and were plainly aware that they were engaged in an 'adult' conversation in the presence of two girls from their year. This meant they often considered their answers within this male versus female context, and how they defined masculinity 'against' each other.
		Michael	15	10	Male	Upper	Asian	Michael was very quiet and often seemed tense throughout the session. After some time he began to interact without prompting, however he also displayed a poor ability to 'read' the mood or rules of the conversation. This could lead to him interrupting			



								others stating non-normative ideas and revealing opinions that might clash with others that had been offered. This was particularly insightful, and sometimes led to productive friction.			
	Charlotte	15	10	Female	Middle	Caucasian		Confident and friendly. Shared a close friendship with Carmen, and would often support or justify similar responses. Did not really talk much with male members of the group, but was very happy to take the lead in a			

							conversation or state her thoughts.			
	Carmen	15	10	Female	Middle	Caucasian	Close with Charlotte, and happy to engage in the group. However, it was rare that she would initiate an opinion herself, preferring to back up what Charlotte had stated. Her body language often indicated that she also considered her answers, or edited her responses internally, due to the male			

								presence in the room.			
4	Lionheart	14	9	Male	Lower	Asian	Lionheart was younger than his cousin, and initially reluctant to speak, preferring to allow Kesha to take the lead. However, after she had berated him gently for not speaking, he in fact became quite active for the most part of the session. His enthusiasm and energy waned	Home Based	Interview	This interview took place within the front room of a friend of the interviewer, who had reached out to the mum of Lionheart and Kesha. They were cousins who had grown up together and held an easy familiarity between them. Although some topics, like sexting or	

							towards the end, as he lost interest (perhaps because he didn't share the same reflective enjoyment as Kesha) and he once again drew into himself.			'naughty' gossip, made them cast looks at one another (due to their familial bond) they seemed to feel able to speak openly within each others presence.
	Kesha	16	11	Female	Lower	Caucasian	Kesha seemed to enjoy reflecting on her experiences as a teenager who had developed alongside the rise of social networking. She took her time to think through the discussion points, and had no issue challenging the points made by			

								the interviewer or Lionheart. As an older teen, she characterises (and expresses) the growing resentment towards Facebook and other social networks, and frequently drew upon many negative experiences she had encountered in online contexts.			
5	Ives	11	8	Female	Lower	Asian	Ives was the youngest of the group, and the most excitable. She was always trying to get the other girls to listen to her points, and to validate her place within	Home Based	Focus Group	This was one of the highlights of the project, and perhaps the most enjoyable interview for the researcher. All the girls were related cousins from Islamic	

							the group. She alternated between attempting to fit in with the group norms, and stand apart from them. Happy and bubbly, she was eager to speak at all points.			families, and this familiarity led to some very intense and vocal conversations that produced incredible and personal details. Interestingly, unlike other sessions where the age and gender gap between participant and researcher created boundaries, in this session the girls seemed to relish discussing their practices with an older male figure. Although part of the group dynamic did create semi-private
	Chanel	16	11	Female	Lower	Asian	Chanel, as the oldest, was the clear leader of the group. She had an authority over the others that she used to quieten them when she thought they being too loud, or going off track from the discussion. She tried to help the interviewer keep track of			

								the session and demonstrate that she was of a mature age.			conversations, the competing personalities within the group always dragged forth these ideas. This session lasted for over 90 minutes and laid a strong thematic framework for many of the gender based themes this thesis explores.
	Dior	15	10	Female	Lower	Asian		Dior was the second in command, but also enjoyed alternating between performing a mature female role and then switching to a younger style. She supported many of the discussions and moved them on, or filled in pauses, when the conversational momentum slowed down.			

	Estee	15	10	Female	Lower	Asian	Estee was the quietest member of the group and reluctant to engage with the interviewer. She did not possess any SNS accounts, and went to a different school than the other girls. With the presence of a strange adult questioning the group on their daily habits, it is likely that she felt these differences more keenly and chose to diminish her role. At many times during the session she sought to create a quieter back stage			
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								performance between her and Ives, where she could discuss related themes separately. However, the other cousins always sought to include her and prompted her to speak to the entire group.			
6	Judie	14	9	Female	Upper	Caucasian	Judie seemed to be keenly aware of the age differences in the room, specifically the gap between the researcher and participants. This led to	Rougard Academy	Interview	This was the penultimate interview at Rougard, and consisted of a brief twenty minute interview with two girls. Both girls were boarders (i.e.	

							some hesitance within her answers, which alternated between adult-ish sentiments and then, in moments where she was more relaxed, responses more akin to her peers.			lived at the school) and seemed to share a close kinship. Although they were forthcoming within the interview, it was clear that they found discussing these themes with a male figure (who was much older than them) quite strange.
	Alis	14	9	Female	Middle	Mediterranean	Alis, like Judie, also seemed to feel the age gap within the room. Most her responses and demeanour were focused around appearing mature, and setting herself apart from her peers.			

7	Blake	13	9	Female	Lower	Caucasian	Blake, out of many within this thesis, acted in a way that seemed most closely aligned with her age. Her responses often seemed to be issued without consideration, and reflected her real thoughts. She was excitable and happy to take part.	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	This focus group consisted of Christine and Blake, as well as two other boys from separate year groups. From the outset, the differences in gender and age created an interesting atmosphere where a clear interactional divide was present. Although all respondents politely listened to one another, there were no examples of them contributing to shared conversations, other than to nod and murmur. The
	Christine	14	9	Female	Lower	Caucasian	Christine was much the same Blake, and the two often fed off each other during the session in terms of the energy of their responses. She was open to stating her judgement			

								during discussions.			researcher felt that this tension often contributed to how these teens created the identity roles (gender or age based) being performed.
8	Saab	14	8	Male	Middle	Asian	Saab was a shy boy who found much of the interview session quite awkward. After bonding with him over sports interests he became more open, but still seemed to find it hard to vocalise many aspects of his daily SNS that seemed so natural to him. He was more confident	Home Based	Interview	This was one of the first research sessions in the project. Saab's Mum was present in an adjoining room throughout the interview. This may have accounted for some of his nervous behaviour, as he might have worried that some responses could place him in a difficult	

								<p>discussing the behaviour of his peers or relations. He also revealed to me that he had been bullied previously for his Islamic beliefs, but ultimately befriended his aggressor. For such a young teenage boy, he was very compassionate and rarely seemed to perform stereotypical masculine traits.</p>			<p>position. Despite this, the interview uncovered some great ideas and provided the researcher with an opportunity to practice interviewing in a challenging context.</p>

9	Sarah	16	11	Female	Upper	Mediterranean	The most vocal and dominant personality within the group. She openly initiated conversations and dealt with delicate topics. Although a strong character, this was never at the expense of the other girls, whom she always supported.	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	A focus group with an all female group of 'boarders'. These girls displayed one of the strongest friendships within the project, and shared the same opinions on all of the topics that were covered. This tight knit group, perhaps bonded by their school living arrangements, had created their own internal norms that related to specific social practices.
	Olivia	15	10	Female	Middle	Mediterranean	The youngest of the group, Olivia seemed to look up to the other two and do her best to fit in/agree with what was said.			
	Stacey	16	11	Female	Upper	Mediterranean	Stacey was always a supportive second to			

								Sarah, and displayed a good kinship with the other girls.			
10	Ana	14	9	Female	Middle	Asian	A transfer student from China. At the start of the session Ana was timid at many points and seemed to look at her peers for the appropriate responses to questions. However, she swiftly gained a lot of confidence and was able to offer an interesting 'outside' perspectives on a number of behavioural practices she	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	This focus group took place after lunch break with a mixed gender group.	

							had witnessed.			
	Sarah	14	9	Female	Middle	Caucasian	Seemed to share a newish friendship with Anna, and frequently strongly declared a number of thoughts and feelings to her (as if to demonstrate them as the 'appropriate' responses)			
	Daniel	14	9	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Although Daniel seemed at ease during the session, the presence of the two strong			



								female characters seemed to discourage him from responding unless directly addressed.			
	11	Valerie	16	11	Female	Middle	Caucasian	Warm and open. Valerie accompanied many of her conversational points with examples she displayed on her phone, which never left her hand throughout the chat.	Home Based	Interview	Valerie and Andy were brother and sister who went to the same school. The interview was a fifteen minute informal chat that drew upon the researcher's previous acquaintances.
		Andy	15	11	Male	Middle	Caucasian				

12	Mark	10	6	Male	Lower	Caucasian	<p>Mark was the youngest participant in the study, and the only one included from St Martins Primary School. He was a pleasant and polite boy, who wanted to really engage with the interview. He was happy to talk about anything, and displayed honesty without agenda. During the interview he spoke a lot about his older brother, who he saw as a role model, and who was the reason why Mark wanted to</p>	St Martins Primary	Interview	<p>St Martins was the location of the first interviews for the thesis, before logistical access issue forced a change in the study approach. For this session, an adult guardian was initially present but quickly decided to allow the session to progress unchaperoned. However, the presence of the other adult figure seemed to have had little, if any, impact upon the responses from Mark.</p>
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								use SNS. However, his youth also contributed to a large amount of technical and social naivety. Though he was too young to 'legally' own a Facebook account, his Mum allowed him access when she was present. He used the platform to create groups with his friends, which involved online gaming and keeping out girls (who he regarded as annoying).			

13	Toffy	15	10	Male	Upper	Caucasian	Toffy was an opinionated teenage boy who consistently positioned himself as an expert on SNS and the behaviours of his peers. He seemed both aloof towards the interviewer and confrontational. His dress style and manner indicated that he originated from a privileged background.	Rougard Academy	Interview	This was short (20 minute) interview conducted within Toffy's morning break time.
14	Nathan	14	9	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Prone to cracking jokes and mocking himself, he seemed to enjoy making the girls laugh	Rougard Academy	Focus Group	This focus group took place during the lunch break at Rougard. It featured students who

							and discussing SNS with them.				
	Carly	14	9	Female	Middle	Caucasian	Both Carly and Freya possessed a mature reflexivity.				
	Freya	14	9	Female	Middle	Caucasian	Unlike some of their peers, they could dive a little deeper into the inner workings of some SNS behaviours (e.g. likes). Interestingly, they could own up to, and accept, activities that made them uncomfortable to discuss. This led to some insightful data.				were all 'boarders' at the academy and seemed to know each other vaguely. This was one of the rare groups where there seemed to be a strong friendship between the girls and the boys.

15	Geoff	15	11	Male	Lower	Caucasian	Perhaps one of the leaders of his year, he was certainly very popular. Geoff seemed able to direct the flow of conversations and seize onto ideas that would resonate (or be supported) by his friends.	Lester Grammar	Focus Group	A session with a Year 11 group of boys. This proved to be a very interesting room that contained a myriad of contrasting personalities, interpersonal tensions and shifting alliances. Due to these factors, it could at times be challenging to move the session forwards in a productive way, but the group frictions also unearthed some great content. The 'cooler' boys, of which these teens seemed to be, were located at the back. The
	Alfie	15	11	Male	Middle	Caucasian	Liked to joke and laugh, but also offered some thoughtful insights at times.			
	Sid	15	11	Male	Middle	Asian	Not as technologically savvy as his friends. He appeared to be lower in the pecking order than his peers, but still			

							considered likeable. He alternated between looking at what was on Martin's phone, and getting involved in the discussion.			less cool, 'nerdy' at the front. Those at the back would often snigger at those sat toward the front, or create uncomfortable silences that signalled their exclusion.
	Chris	16	11	Male	Upper	Chinese	Intelligent, and although perhaps not the leader of his friends, they often looked at him to validate their responses.			
	Martin	15	11	Male	Middle	Asian	Spent most of the session on his phone, occasionally giving some verbal feedback. He was uninterested in the discussion or topics at hand.			