Social network sites: a constructionist approach to self, identity and community in MySpace

Social Network Sites: A Constructionist Approach to Self, Identity and Community in MySpace

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Abstract

MySpace is a social network site (SNS) that forms an essential part of modern online communication. The creation of a personal profile in MySpace allows a user to connect with a global network of 'friends' and communicate in a number of different ways. This thesis sets out to explore the experience of MySpace in terms of the self, identity and community. MySpace will be studied from a constructionist form of social psychology that benefits from new dialects of movement, performance and process. MySpace is conceptualised as a *mediated community* where users shape and are *shaped by* their experience of using the site. This study uses empirical data taken from the natural use of MySpace.

A total of 100 open-access profiles are explored for the myriad ways that users constitute the self and identity in MySpace. The analysis identifies a number of functions of mediating the self including: the *brand me*, the *hoped-for self* and the self *in potential*. The *brand me* describes the reflective ability to realise other normative capacities through the practice of blogging in MySpace. This focuses on the ability to create new forms of subjectivity in MySpace interactions. In a similar vein, the *hoped-for self* explains the modification of the self through the act of profile changing and focuses on the actual, everyday practices of the self. Each of these analytic themes demonstrates the importance of the relational connections in MySpace. Finally, the self is defined as *in potential* as the analysis demonstrates an ongoing need for a narrative construction to the profile that is performed in both the visual and the textual aspects of the page.

Keywords:

Communication ▪ Community ▪ Constructionism ▪ Experience ▪ Identity ▪ Mediation ▪ MySpace ▪ Social Network Sites ▪ Social Psychology ▪ Subjectivity ▪ The Internet ▪ The Self

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Chapter 1:

Introducing MySpace

1.1 General Introduction

MySpace.com is an online social network site (SNS) that allows members to share discussions, photos, videos and (we)blogs with a global network of members. Many online groups (forums, listservs etc.) are collected around a particular issue (e.g. a political group, an organisation or a collective passion). However, MySpace and other similar sites (Friendster, Facebook, Bebo etc.) are designed to facilitate communication on a broader scale. MySpace users log-on through the main Web portal and build their own personal profile (a format that is characteristic of most SNSs). It is through this profile that communication is organised and performed. New contacts are reachable by browsing the entire network of users and adding them as 'friends'. This action automatically links the two profiles together and allows for communication in other forms of the profile (predominantly in a section of the profile known as 'the wall').

MySpace is a global network of profiles that is formed by the exponential growth of users adding other users as friends. The number of friends a user has in MySpace would typically outweigh any number of friends a person could maintain in offline life. For example, most aspiring musicians have MySpace friends that reaches somewhere in the hundreds of thousands. One of the unique selling points of MySpace is the opportunity to add favourite music icons as friends. MySpace is one of the most popular places for new bands to market their music and is a potential explanation of the rapid the growth of the site. MySpace is also widely recognised as being a public access site where users are able to make their profiles visible to a vast network of viewers. The term 'user' is one that has been adopted by other writers in this area (e.g. boyd & Ellison, 2007; Thewall, 2008b).

MySpace is also widely recognised as the first SNS to take advantage of the power of customisation. MySpace users can modify the background of their personal profile with intricate Web designs that they have produced themselves or taken from other Websites (through the ability to import the HTML from other websites). The

profile then forms the platform for a variety of ways that users can interact in MySpace (e.g. through the blog, the wall, personal messaging etc.). Mayfield (2007:14) refers to the way that users customise their MySpace profile in the following way:

> Social networks on the web are like contained versions of the sprawling blog network. People joining a social network usually create a profile and then build a network by connecting to friends and contacts in the network, or by inviting real-world contacts and friends to join the social network. These communities retain the interest of their members by being useful to them and providing services that are entertaining or help them to expand their networks. MySpace, for instance, allows members to create vivid, chaotic home pages (they've been likened to the walls of a teenager's bedroom) to which they can upload images, videos and music.

Mayfield demonstrates the significance of customising the profile background when he likens them to the 'walls of a teenager's bedroom'. The issue here is that MySpace (and other SNSs) are changing the way that people communicate through the need to be involved with new practices like decorating the profile background (or 'home pages' in the above quote). Unlike the early text based forms of online communication, MySpace users embed a variety of visual and textual information in their personal profiles that are present at the site of communication. This combines with the range of new ways to communicate in MySpace (blogs, wall posts etc.). These practices are synonymous with the *Web 2.0* movement and characterise the social, communicative powers of the Internet. MySpace is a prominent part of the new Web 2.0 era and personifies what Jenkins (1992) refers to as the 'convergence culture'[1]. In making this statement Jenkins is identifying the way that users come together, in one space, to perform a number of social practices. This refers to the way many of these practices were previously dispersed across the Internet and the new Web 2.0 era explains the increased accessibility to many new forms of communication.

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[1] However, Jenkins (1992) was not referring to the specific use of SNSs in his definition of convergence culture due to the fact that he was speaking before their invention.

Web 2.0 is essentially a new form of communication that emphasises collaboration and user-generated content. As with other forms of Web 2.0 technologies (wikis, virtual learning environments etc.), MySpace is a place for communication that accentuates the role of the user. The existence of SNSs relies on user-generated content. MySpace is part of a modern form of communication that promotes a high level of customisation and personalisation through the use of a personal profile. The following section will explain the background to practices of this kind; in particular, this will highlight the origin or the Internet, the introduction of the World Wide Web and the recent impact of the Web 2.0 movement. This explanation will allow for a contextualised description of MySpace.

1.2 Cyberspace, Cybersociety and Cyberpunk

In the 1980s the Internet was spreading across the globe. Although, at this time it remained relatively limited in terms of access and was typically a technology of the elite and of big business. Initially developed by the military in the 1960s, the ARPANET was the first decentralised network that was able to process information from a range of computers. The linking of remote computers led to the first 'online community' of researchers who were able to share computer information. The further developments of Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) led to the ability to 'package-up' information between different computers and send them via a network. This gave rise to a more straightforward level of internet use including: bulletin boards, mailing lists and other forms of discussion boards. This was still early in the evolution of the Internet as it is known today but the development of this technology circulated the possibility of a high-tech future that was ripe with potential.

The global discourse around the initial development of the Internet led to a high degree of speculation from many writers and theorists. The Internet was set to have implications for all aspects of social, economic and political life. In *The Network Nation* (1978)*, Hiltz and Turoff report the first extended study of 'computer conferencing'. This study envisages a world where computer connectivity formed the basis of society, and even though their study pre-dated the widespread use computers, it was able to recognise how the use of the computer revolutionised the ability to communicate. Hiltz and Turoff set up small networks (similar to modern message boards) and followed the collaborative work that people accomplished over the network. The work shows the immense possibility of networked computers and led to

a high amount of speculation about the future of this technology. This mapped to a growing possibility of a *cyberspace* that was growing in mainly fictional forms of literature.

William Gibson wrote the book *Neuromancer* (1984) as a way of portraying a future vision of the world where humans and machines become infinitely connected. The book popularised many science fiction notions of man and machine brought together in cyberspace. The term cyberspace is characterised by the inability for humans to live without machines (this is continued by a similar interest in notions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that was also growing at the time).The use of the term cyberspace is refers to a symbolic vision of the future where the use of computers presented a new world of connectivity. Michael Benedikt (1991:29) describes cyberspace as follows:

> Cyberspace: A new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines. A world in which a global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic light.

Benedikt gives ten similar attempts at defining cyberspace before he proclaims that cyberspace does not exist. Benedikt argues that cyberspace is not limited to the boundaries of one definition and illustrates the way that the computer maintains the connection between different people as opposed to focusing on the relationship between humans and machines. This dedication to the *people* behind the network has led some scholars to prefer the term 'cybersociety' as opposed to cyberspace (notably Jones, 1995). Either way, when we feel like we are somehow engaging with a computational form this could be recognised as a type of cyberspace.

In the discussions of cyberspace and cybersociety there is a comparison between online life and offline life (or 'real life'). Cyberspace theorists assert that online life is an extension of our real life which lacks clear boundaries. In this space people are not confined to the boundaries of their real life bodies and they could choose to shape themselves in new ways. This vision of cyberspace conceptualised a space where one could experiment with different forms of identity and connect with people in a way that far exceeded their everyday forms of connectivity.

Cyberspace is closely linked to cyberpunk theories that developed as a subgenre of science fiction with a distinctly postmodern turn. Cyberpunk is the combination of a growing field of cybernetics and a general punk attitude to a radical change in social order. Many of the writings projected a nihilistic view of future earth that depicted the problems that would rise from an electronic society. Many of the texts in the 1980s and 90s represented an obsession with cybernetics and ecology (Dery, 1996; Reichardt, 1978; Warrick, 1980). Cyberpunk theorising offered a challenge to the essentialism of modernism and included the invocation of a range of possible futures. The cyberpunk movement includes the writings of contemporary authors like JG Ballard and Bruce Sterling.

This opened an area for postmodern thought where the ideas of cyberspace and cyberpunk were able to explore wider arguments about the role of humanity, science, technology and civilisation. For many people in the late 1980s the computer was still far too expensive to buy and subsequently the image of cyberspace would have been delivered to them through authors like Ballard and Sterling. This movement coincided with other discourses around technological innovation, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. For example, McCaffery (1991: 8) explores the introduction of technology in the following way:

> What does it mean to be human in today's world? What has stayed the same and what has changed? How has technology changed the answers we supply to such questions? And what does all this suggest about the future we inhabit?

McCaffery is keen to question the nature of humanity in light of development of the Internet. Questions of this kind were echoed amongst many writers of the time who speculated about a disembodied reality through the use of computers. One explanation is that cyberspace offered a sense of freedom from the social and political turbulence of the late 1980s. Here, cyberspace provided speculation about a brighter, technically driven future. Furthermore, the writings on cyberspace became a way of doing more than fantasising about the future as it became a way of commenting on the disaffection with real life. The discussions around the link between man and machine were able to expose the issues within society of that time. For example, feminist writers noticed how cyberspace demonstrated the male dominated world and exposed the disadvantaged position of the female (Haraway, 1985; Plant, 1997).

Literature on cyberspace has all the trappings of a pop culture that accentuates post-modern undertones. The writing portrays a comparison between the rich possibility of the virtual world with the hardness of the computer and everyday life (Dibbell, 1998). In the cyberspace or cyberpunk literature the general image of the world is one where the computer offers a way out current forms of society. The relationship to this future was characteristic of a postmodern rhetoric around the technology of the future. Science fiction was more generally an opportunity to present a version of the world that did not include any of the concerns of everyday life. Cyberspace offered a projection of a world that was beyond the current political climate and offered the opportunity to rediscover community.

The notion of the 'virtual community' (Rheingold, 1993) aimed to rebuild the outlook of the future at the time (in American culture). The 'virtual community' instilled a vision of American future that projected a positive outlook. Even today, it remains one of the founding pieces in Internet research and is often cited as one of the first pieces of research to recognise the community potential of the Internet. Rheingold (1993: 12) states that we have access to 'a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalise the public sphere'. This shows the power of the Internet as a way of reforming notions of community. The communication in a virtual community is one that propels a positive vision of community and communion. Therefore, the introduction of the Internet symbolises the attempt to form powerful visions of the future that imbue core notions of identity and community. These two themes form a platform for analysis in this thesis, primarily as central concerns of a social psychological approach, but more poignantly due to the complex history of identity and community in cyberspace literature.

1.3 Virtual Community and Online Identity

Rheingold (1993) uses the term 'virtual community' to define his experience of the San Francisco based Whole Earth 'lectronic Link (or WELL). Rheingold identifies the way the people use their communication in this space in a way that constitutes a community. This involves a dense network of friendships that could recreate the offline notion of community. Rheingold (1994:6) argues that the virtual community directly relates to the disappearance of 'informal public spaces' and explains the Internet as an opportunity to regain a sense of community. To many, cyberspace

provided a space for regaining a sense of community. The cyberspace literature is also concern with the notion of *identity*. The Internet was presumed to offer a space, like in the notion of virtual community, where there would be a greater amount of freedom and choice. This would lead to an increased level of experimentation in the production of an online identity. The notion of virtual identity was used to explain the ability to create a number of different, and potentially new, identities in cyberspace. Incorporating these ideas, Turkle (1995: 184) famously wrote about how online communication offers the opportunity to *re-invent* oneself:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You don't have to worry about the slots people put you in as much. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see are your words.

Turkle describes, from her own experience, how the computer becomes an opportunity to form a 'second self'. This definition explains a second version of oneself in cyberspace where the limitations of real-life could be left behind. Stone (1996) echoes this idea in arguing that individuals have a number of multiple identities that can be chosen from depending on the nature of the online exchange. The sense of choice is firmly rooted in the individual as they log on and off into different worlds, constantly changing who they might want to be. From this approach, the internet offers a space where identities could be selected or deselected at will, as in a game or in fiction.

This notion of virtual identity promotes a disembodied view of cyberspace that extended the possibilities of experimentation and choice. Again, Rheingold (1994:147) is at the forefront of online identity theorising where he argues that cyberspace 'dissolves the boundaries of identity'. This supports the idea that users are able to trial different forms of identity as the boundaries are broken down in cyberspace. In this context, virtual identity is almost a strategic display of a desired identity in online communication. Cyberspace has an almost mythical nature where the confines of our rigid identity are swapped for the imaginative world in cyberspace. There is an underlying rhetoric that the real world left individuals immobilised and powerless, whereas the emergent arena of cyberspace presented the individual with an unlimited amount of possibility and opportunity (see Lanier, 1990, Plant, 1993, Leary,

1999). The notion of identity and community are both connected to a sense of liberation and freedom through the cyberspace movement. The Internet became a space in which to embrace the possibilities of post-modernity and transcend real world problems.

Cyberspace personifies the way that people could build communities online through the use of the Internet. In doing so, it offered many futurists and other speculative individuals the opportunity to comment on the problems of real life and the way the online world offered something different. Cyberspace had an almost romantic, mythical nature in the way that it perpetuated discussions around the future of man and technology, and for the most part, this was presented in terms of a utopian vision of the future. Cyberspace literature was then accelerated in 1989 with the invention of the World Wide Web.

1.4 The World Wide Web

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee developed the first user-friendly interface on the Internet that used a series of hyperlinks for storing information in a World Wide Web (WWW or just Web). Berners-Lee recognised that the Internet was far too complex for many people to digest and he devised a number of protocols that could allow information to be stored on Web servers anywhere in the world. The Web used the hyperlink function to reference other pages and instil a collaborative nature to the structure of the Internet. The WWW uses a particular type of language that is universal to all WebPages known as HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language). The Internet is actually only the wires and cables that carry the signal from computer to computer. Therefore, when the term Internet is used it should refer to the physical aspects of the computer network not the Web. However, many attempts to describe the collection of communicative practices over the Web (including this thesis) still use the reference to the Internet as more than the collection of wires and relate to the actual practices that the Internet allows.

It was not until the late part of the 20th Century that the Web began to explode for everyday users. By this time nearly all homes in western societies had a computer that was connected to the Internet. It is at this point that the writings of cyberspace appeared to be materialising through the use of computers for social endeavours and work-based practices. Once again, these new technologies were characterised by a sense of community and identity. If this was seen as the first coming of the Internet,

then the second coming followed shortly after. The second coming is also known as *Web 2.0.*

1.5 Web 2.0

Web 2.0 (first use of the term is typically attributed to O'Reilly, 2005) refers to a further development in Web technology. Web 2.0 is the point in time where all the speculation of the earlier cyberspace theorists became true. The Internet allows people to communicate in up-to-the-second forms that causes the boundary between online and offline to become increasingly blurred. This means that many people no longer just hear about the impact of the computer through the stories of cyberspace, they now own their own computer and can use the Internet at home. In these new forms of communication the social network sites (SNSs) rapidly became the quintessential tool of modern interaction. As the literature around the cyberspace movement suggested, the Web appears to have become a central place for people to recover a sense of community and identity.

Jenkins (1992) describes Web 2.0 as a 'convergence culture' that personifies a participatory culture where people are driving forth the technology. For Jenkins, the notion of participation is bound up in the new social formations on the Web that blurs the relationship between production and consumption. In particular, there is a focus on different levels of user-generated content that are formed through 'mash-ups' and 'mix-ups' from other sources on the Web. To 'mash-up' means to take other pieces of information (a music video, for example) and create something new with the content (a new video perhaps). The success of YouTube[2] can be recognised in the way that it allows users to recreate their own versions of popular music videos. Jenkins (2006:i) writes that new technologies 'are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media content'.

The ability to 're-circulate media content' through the Internet, as Jenkins argues, shows the importance of creative content in the use of new media technologies. In modifying videos and other content people are able to "make it their own". This user-generated content is a highly marketable resource in the new media industry. Information and communication are the currency of new Web based products and services. Therefore, the implication for this new combination of

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[2] YouTube is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share and view new videos (www.youtube.com).

production and consumption is at the centre of the new uses in SNSs. Web 2.0, as a platform for content creation, is based on the presumption that people will re-distribute content they find in other places on the Web by adding their own take on the content. SNSs are part of the growing area of Web 2.0 where there is an emphasis on sharing, communication and user-generated content.

1.6 Social Network Sites

SNSs are easily recognised as one of the most prominent new-comers from the Web 2.0 tradition. As suggested in the general introduction, SNSs are based on communicating through a personal profile. SNSs have become one of the most popular ways of communicating over the Web. If one is to spend any amount of time in a public setting where there is a high number of computers (a library, for example), the colourful background of MySpace profiles, or the blue and white logo of the Facebook page, would be unmistakable. Figure 1 shows the 2008 ComScore report of the relationship between MySpace and Facebook in terms of total unique viewers per month. It is clear that the number of people who use MySpace remained relatively constant from 2007 to 2008 (somewhere over 100 million). To put this in context, the sum total of the MySpace network has constantly remained at a level that rivals the population of most European countries.
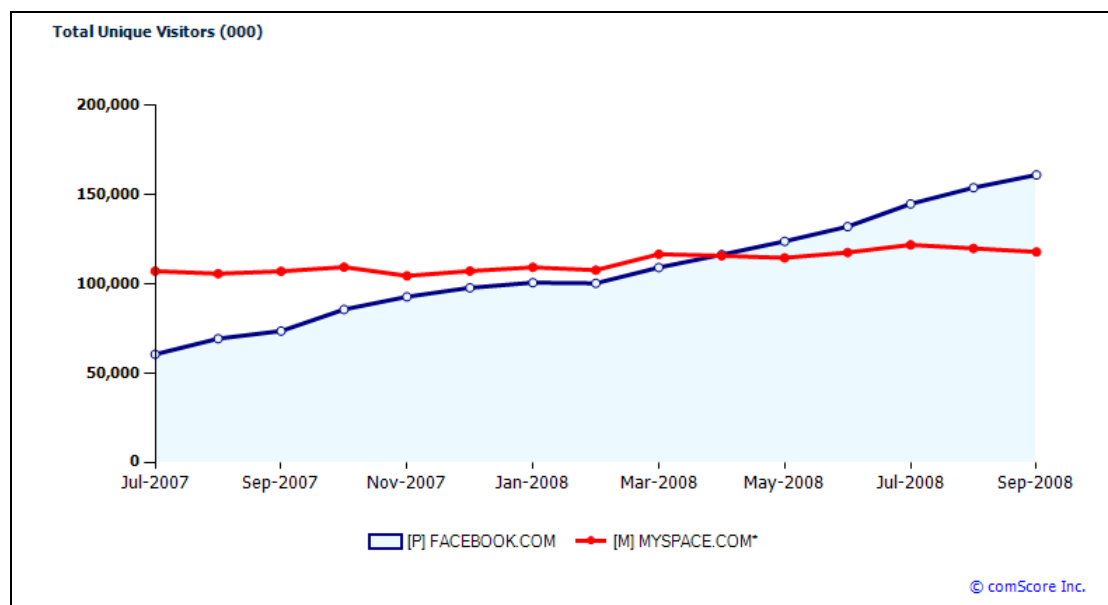
Figure 1. The 2008 comScore report showing the unique monthly views of MySpace and Facebook.

In 2008, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) produced a report on the use of SNSs. This report concluded that SNSs are most popular with teenagers and young adults. These users were found to check their online profiles at least every other day. The report also found that Facebook attracts a different class of people (ABC1s) compared to MySpace (C2DEs). Some authors have speculated that different SNSs may appeal to different social groups (Ellison et al., 2006). The top SNSs in the UK and America are: MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and LinkedIn. Research has shown that a substantial number of users have a profile in one of these top SNSs (Gross & Acqusti, 2005; Lampe et al., 2006; Stutzman, 2006).

The log-in process can be slightly different with each site, for example, the early version of Facebook asked users to log on through an actual offline network (e.g. their college or school). At the time this was comparable to the MySpace access page where there were no such restrictions. More recently, Facebook has modified the usage in terms of access to by opening the network capabilities to be public. This means that many more people are able to use the site than once before (for more information on the nature of the log-in process see Thelwall, 2008a). Facebook has also joined with Google to make the profiles more searchable in the first instance.

The development of different ways of searching for new friends in SNSs has prompted investigation into the function of SNSs as space for the maintenance of existing ties (Ellison et al., 2006). This research shows that current offline relationships should not be excluded from the way people use new SNSs. Many users are able to log-on to a SNS and then search for their friends through the internal search engine that is available on each site. In fact, many users also give themselves pseudonyms that are immediately recognisable to their fellow peers in order to make the searching aspect easier. Therefore, it appears that many users go to a great deal of effort to be easily visible to their offline friends.

Peluchette and Karl (2008) use a survey method to investigate the attitudes towards placing varying degrees of content on Facebook. This study shows that there is a range of different forms of information that is placed on Facebook and that some users are cautious about the visibility of potential employers. In a similar study, the use of questionnaire data shows interesting findings on the information disclosure in MySpace (De Souza & Dick, 2008). This study features responses from 263 school children who commented on their use of MySpace. This research clarifies that a high amount of people check their profiles regularly. It also shows that not all MySpace

users present sensitive information in a way that would be interpreted by the media. The use of surveys and questionnaires has been a popular method in the investigation of MySpace and other SNSs.

SNSs have been found to instil a developmental process in the way that users 'grow-up' in social network terms (Livingstone, 2007). This could be the process of moving from one SNS to another. For example, a user may start with a site like MySpace and then move to Facebook (which gained this reputation by originally being aimed at college students) or to LinkedIN (that focuses on a work based audience). SNSs have even been found to cater for the older users with sites like 'Saga Zone' which is aimed at the over 50 age group.

Research shows that many SNSs are typically found to be occupied by a majority of female users that are typically under 25 (Thelwall, 2008b, 2008c). In SNSs the profile page is of the utmost importance. Each of the SNSs has a template profile page that makes the site itself instantly recognisable and allows users to upload information in a certain way. The success of a SNS rests on the ability for users to negotiate this practice of profiling. The profile page is also the first place a member checks when they log-on to MySpace or any other SNS. It is the hub of everything else: the wall, the blogs, shared photographs and all of the personal information (to be explained in more detail in the following section). The profile page has been found to be a place for building a social network (boyd & Heer, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007) and facilitating tasks of the community (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003).

The use of personal profiles in all forms of SNSs can vary significantly based on the nature of the SNS. For example, LinkedIn endorses a very professional appearance compared to that of MySpace or Facebook that have a more informal design. Attention to and tailoring of details in the profile page is a routine presentational issue for all SNS users. Profiles are connected through a series of hyperlinks that enables each user to move between profiles. Users who wish to increase the number of links to their profile need to offer sufficient details in order to a) make their profile searchable by other users and b) provide grounds for other users to initiate interaction on the basis of shared interests. Thus, a classic device found on many profiles is to provide exhaustive lists of interests, hobbies, recent activities, and a range of other information.

Profile changing is an active part of life in a SNS. Profile changing can be simply defined as updating or shifting certain aspects of the profile page using the profile editor that is only accessible to the main user. The profile editor operates in a separate location away from the profile page itself. Here users are able to access and update information that is presented on their main profile page. In MySpace, the profile editor also displays information on their friends through the link 'friend space'. This enables the user to keep up-to-date with changes on their friends pages (similar to the newsfeed function in Facebook). The actual changes to the profile could range from a small change (e.g. song choice, display name or mood setting) to a large change (typically an entire background change). Each of these aspects of the page will be identified in the following introduction to MySpace.

1.7 MySpace

In July 2003, MySpace was launched. The owners of MySpace – currently Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – have been keen from its inception to promote the idea that the networks of profiles, blogs and messages are a community. Clearly, the commercial stakes of establishing this claim are high. The sheer numbers of users on MySpace have made it attractive to both professional marketing companies and aspiring artists (such as songwriters and film makers). The launch of MySpace in 2003 was conveniently positioned around a time when many users were emigrating from sites like Friendster and Xanga. The decision to leave these sites could be attributed to a number of reasons, most noticeably that musicians were unable to post information about their band due to profiling. Many users easily switched from one SNS to the other. This entered a new era of SNSs where the users could customise their own profiles. From a technological perspective, many argue that the music appeal to fans was not the main source of its success, but it was the ability to respond to users needs by developing an 'organic' form of program advancement in the ability to customise profiles (boyd, 2007a).

MySpace grew exponentially in 2004 as teenagers flocked to the site to meet new friends and chat with idolised band members. The sale of MySpace to the Murdoch's News Corporation in 2005 for $580 million secured the idea that new SNSs were distinguished from the first wave of SNSs in terms of size and wealth. In July 2007, ComScore reported that MySpace had over 114 million users worldwide. The number of people using MySpace became unimaginable as the intricate

background of the MySpace profile became a symbol of new forms of communication in a Web based culture. The following screenshot shows the typical layout of a MySpace profile page:
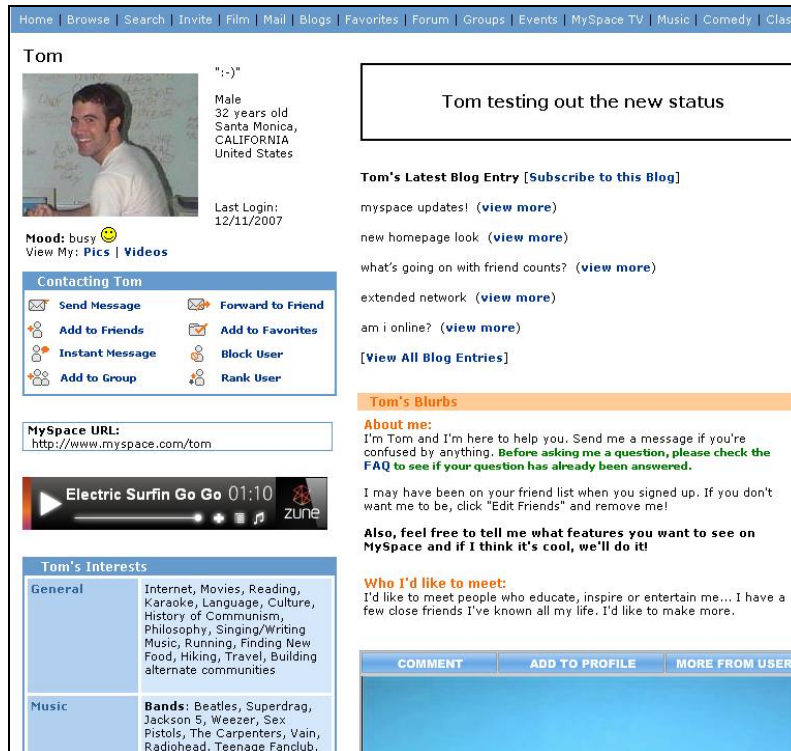
Figure 2. Screenshot of Tom Anderson's MySpace profile (www.myspace.com/tom)

Figure 2 shows the typical layout of a MySpace page. It is the profile of Tom Anderson who is one of the co-founders of MySpace. This profile is also used as a help agent for people to report any issues directly to MySpace. The layout of the profile is characteristic of the majority of profiles. Tom Anderson's profile shows the profile photograph in the top left-hand corner of the page and the rest of the page organised into separate boxes of information. The separate sections all constitute different activities on the profile. For example, directly below the profile photograph is the interactive box. This box provides a range of opportunities to contact Tom, such as, 'send message' or 'add to friends'. The 'send message' function refers to the internal mail client that is available to MySpace users and the 'add to friends' button connect the two profiles by first sending an approval message to Tom (Friends in MySpace must first be 'accepted'). As can be seen, each of the different ways to

communicate is contained with individual, self-contained boxes on the profile page. Many users will use 'the wall' as the main way to communicate. The wall is located in the bottom right-hand corner of the profile page (just out of view in above screenshot but will feature in the later screenshot of the profile). One of the main ways to communicate in MySpace is to conduct conversations back and forth across the wall.

The majority of open-access profiles look similar to the one that Tom is presenting in Figure 2. It is through this profile that MySpace users have a foundation for constructing their own profile. The right-hand side of the screenshot shows the blogs that Tom has saved to his page. By clicking on one of the blogs the viewer will be directed to a separate page where the blogs are located. The 'blurb' is then directly below the blogs and is a space for a general introduction from the profile author. Many users write a message for all new visitors to read in the blurb as a way of welcoming them to the page. Notice that Tom's blurb reads 'I'm Tom and I'm here to help you'. For many users, this space would be an opportunity to give an informal introduction to who they are and some of their favourite interests. Many users speak of themselves in a way that summarises 'who they are' and include some of their favourite pastimes or hobbies. Research shows that males are less likely to mention their significant other in the blurb section of their page (Magnuson & Dunes, 2008).

The left hand-side of Tom's profile (Figure 2) shows a box that presents personal information in a more formal orientation. Entering biographical data of this kind is inputted once the profile has been created. A new member has the opportunity to offer information on basic characteristics including: location, gender, age, physical characteristics and occupation. There is also the opportunity to comment on more sensitive issues like 'sexual orientation' or 'attitude to children'. All of these options require the user to select from a drop down list of possible options. For example, in the case of parental options the member has the choice of 'someday', 'undecided', 'proud parent', 'I don't want kids', 'no answer' (default). The more sensitive answers carry a default setting. Many users are free to input any information into this section of the profile and have been known to exaggerate certain aspects (assuming that most sixteen year olds fail to earn $250,000 a year). MySpace is a public site and even these subtle performances of information contribute to wider form of social interaction. It can also be noted that if a user chooses to ignore a certain question then there entire category does not appear on the main profile page (e.g. Tom's profile has

no mention of income meaning that he has chosen to not enter any information on this subject).

Figure 3. Tom Anderson's biographical data and comments section of his profile.

Figure 3 shows a second screenshot of the further elements of Tom Anderson's profile page. The biographical information on Tom's profile shows that his details are listed as status (single), here for (friends), hometown (Los Angeles), Ethnicity (white/Caucasian), zodiac sign (Libra), smoke/drink (no/no), education (grad/professional) and occupation (president, MySpace). This biographical data is separated from information appertaining to musical tastes or friendship groups that are in a separate box on the profile. The biographical data stays contained within a separate section of the profile regardless of how the other information is presented. The biographical data is part of the information that can only be seen by friends of the user. All of the biographical data on the profile can be updated at any moment in the profile editor.

Each of the aspects of the biographical data that is selected from the drop-down box can be searched for across MySpace. For example, if you were looking to meet people who were using MySpace in order to find a partner you could search for those profiles that were here for 'dating'. It is therefore easier for people who do not already

know each to connect through the MySpace network as there are no issues around managing the existing offline network. It is for this reason that MySpace has been labelled as a 'connector website' (DiPerna, 2007). Quantitative investigations of biographical information in MySpace have found that the average user is female, early-twenties and interested in 'making friends' (McPherson et al., 2001; Suter, 2006; Thelwall, 2008b).

The right-hand side of the profile in Figure 2 is the wall. Here messages are posted by other users and appear in reverse chronological order on the page. Each of the posts features a cropped version of the profile photograph in addition to the textual aspects of the post. There is an intrinsic overlapping of posts as the different conversations lead to a multitude of conversations on the wall. In the public profiles the wall can be seen by anyone who visits the page. Each of the posts is automatically given a time signature that is displayed at the top of each post. This information records the date and time when the post was sent.

The rapid advance of any MySpace network is based on the way that people make friends. It is when two profiles are joined that the current networks of both users become accessible to all of their friends. New friends can then connect with old friends and so on. The process involves clicking on the section of the contact information that reads 'add to friends'. A friendship request will then be sent to the other user asking them if they would like to be friends. Once a friendship has been activated, both members are granted access to all areas of the other member's profile. Research has found that the notion of being a friend in MySpace can be understood in terms of 'trustworthiness' (Fono & Raynes-Goldie, 2005). The number of friends each user displays on their profile has the potential to be of social significance due to the public nature of the profile.

Research has shown that a number of approximately 200 friends can be linked to an increased level of social status (Vanden & Boogart, 2006; Walther et al., 2008). In other research, 'friending' has been found to be an integral part of MySpace use (boyd, 2006, 2007b; Donath & boyd, 2004). The *status* of the friendship is also clearly presented through the use of the 'top 8' MySpace application. The top 8 application allows members to differentiate between friends by indicating their top 8 friends (whereby users show their best 8 friends in a particular space on the profile). This has been shown to cause upset feelings when members are de-friended and

dropped from the top 8 (boyd, 2006). The way that users manage their friendships in MySpace is clearly one of the central concerns.

Part of the friendship process may relate to the visual aspects of the profile customisation. The visual elements of a MySpace profile are typically achieved by choosing a background image or colour scheme that will sweep across the entire profile page. The background can be selected from the MySpace database or by importing the code from another website. In previous years this would have required a basic understanding of HTML, but for those users who did not have any knowledge of HTML there soon became many sites on the Web that explained how to customise MySpace profiles. Some have argued that organising the layout of MySpace page and finding codes to alter the background is a socialisation process that foregrounds a sense of behaviour in MySpace (boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, there is certainly more that could be said of the specific nature of the visual aspects of the MySpace profile that is part of a wider social concern as opposed to the result of technological socialisation.

1.8 The Visual in MySpace

In the early forms of cyberspace most online communication was restricted to text-based forms of interaction. A high amount of the research into the notion of the virtual community would have been observed from textual forms of online communication (e.g. Rheingold and the LambdaMoo). The increase of the visual brings a number of new issues to the understanding of online communication. For example, the profile offers a new way of *seeing* the MySpace author through the photographs and the other uses of images on the page. There are also some technical points to be concerned when analysing the way the visual has been displayed in MySpace:

1) The photographs and other visual elements could only have been uploaded and stored by the MySpace page owner.
2) The profile picture forms an integral part of the MySpace page as a whole. Very few MySpace pages do not feature some form of profile photograph or other graphic.
3) There is a range of security options that restricts who the profile photograph can be seen by (all the photographs used in this research are gathered from publicly available profiles with photographs that were open to be seen by all).

4) The *profile photograph* is automatically updated across the entire network. This also works backwards in time and means that all posts that have been left on a different profile walls will be updated when the main profile photograph is changed.

The profile photograph is then a main area of interest when looking at the visual layout of a MySpace page. Photographs that are added to a MySpace page are typically found from one of two places: they can be imported directly from an existing photo album or they can be captured using a webcam and instantly uploaded to the profile. Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) found that people use the photographs on a dating website to support the claims made in the textual description. The issue is whether the photographs present something of the 'real' user or if they are merely a staged interaction (boyd, 2006). Either way, research has shown that people are consciously aware of the impact of the photograph in SNSs as there is typically as set of social rules in which the photographs are assessed by others (Ellison et al., 2006; Siibak, 2009).

Strano (2008) argues that Facebook users choose their photos based on what they see as 'attractive'. Strano contends that attractive photographs could be constituted on the basis of looking like you were having fun or where the user is in a shot with a group of their friends. The visual aspects of the page are clearly growing as an important area of research in the field of Internet studies. Therefore, the visual should be explored in terms of the photographs or other graphics that MySpace users can add to their page and the way that this practice combines with the textual aspects of the profile. This area requires further development and investigation.

1.9 Research Questions and Thesis Organisation

How to start thinking about MySpace analytically? The earlier discussion of the cyberspace movement illustrated some of the work that is traditionally accepted as a position to begin an investigation using social psychological methods. Following Turkle (1995), for example, many projects explore the way people are able to *reinvent* themselves online due to the capabilities of the Internet to provide a window into the 'second self' (see also Stone, 1995, 1996; Súnden, 2003). Similarly, there is a large influence of the sociological tradition, predominantly evolving from the work of

Goffman, which emphasises the 'presentation of self' in online communication (see Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimmons, 2002; Cheung, 2000; Whitty, 2008; Wynn & Katz, 1997).

Whilst being ground-breaking in Internet research, many of these positions relate to a particular explanation of the self (one of either a sociological or a personal form). In an alternative move, this thesis aims to take a different approach to the self in the study of MySpace. This will use a constructionist form of social psychology. In doing so, a different set of analytic concerns will be mobilised, which relate to new dialectics in constructionism of movement, performance and process. The main research questions that will guide this investigation of MySpace are:

1) How is experience of MySpace grounded in the ability to construct the self and identity?

2) How does the community influence the ability to form this particular version of the self and identity?

3) What social practices enable a MySpace user to mediate the self and identity?

4) Can we build an empirical and conceptual account of the experience and subjectivity of using MySpace?

In answering these questions empirical data will be gathered from MySpace and analysed using a selection of psychological principles. This will look at the actual use of MySpace by studying communication and other actions taken directly from the page. This will include an analysis of blogging, wall posting and profile changing in MySpace. Each of the practices will be explored for their potential to actively construct the self and identity in MySpace through their everyday social relations. The investigation is focused on a multiplicity of selves and the relational constitution of experience in MySpace

This thesis is divided into 12 main chapters and each of these chapters deals with a different aspect of the study. The first half of the thesis (the first 6 chapters) provides the theoretical aspects of the investigation. The second half of the thesis (a further set of 6 chapters) consists of the analysis. The use of empirical data from MySpace will be introduced in the first chapter and then analysed in the second half

of the thesis. There is also a final chapter dedicated to a selection of conclusions from the thesis. A further breakdown of each chapter is as follows.

Chapter 2 will look at the contested history of the self and identity. This will track the self through the different forms of personal, social and constructionist accounts of the self. In so doing, Goffman's work is located within the sociological tradition where the interactions of a social nature were matched by a *separate* psychological function that interpreted social encounters. As an alternative perspective, the constructionist approach is positioned as a way of understanding both the social and the psychological in the experience of everyday action. This chapter will also allow for the introduction of the work of Michel Foucault and the notion of *multiplicity*. This term is essential to the new dialectics of constructionism that will develop throughout this thesis. Chapter 2 will clarify differences between the term self and identity and highlight the main direction of the thesis.

Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the area of computer-mediated communication (CMC). This is a formal strand of Internet research that utilises an experimental form of social psychology. In this chapter the relationship between humans and machines takes a different approach to the cyberspace tradition that featured in the general introduction. The use of the computer does not represent the mystical possibilities of the high-tech future but an opportunity to mobilise existing cognitive psychological principles. CMC explores online environments as a window into cognition where computer interactions can be investigated through the modification of laboratory conditions. However, Chapter 3 manages to find some common ground between CMC and the current thesis that is able to be carried forward into the investigation of MySpace (that is, the hyperlink).

Chapter 4 will define the concept of the mediated community. This will begin by exploring Donna Haraway's ideas on the cyborg as a way of distorting the boundaries between human and computer. The work of the cultural psychologists will then be used to introduce the concept of mediation. The aim is to build a definition of MySpace communities that is different to the 'virtual community' (Rheingold, 1993) introduced earlier in this chapter. Mediated community will be defined in light of the specific practice of MySpace (or other SNSs) that offers a starting point for the study of MySpace. Chapter 4 will also highlight the important of the terms *experience* and *subjectivity*. These two terms are fundamental to the overall exploration of MySpace in this thesis.

Chapter 5 describes the methodology. This investigation will involve the design of a bespoke methodology known as the relational hyperlink methodology (RHM). This formulates a custom-built way of gathering data from MySpace that will include the specific implementation of design and sampling procedures. It includes details on the open-access data that will be gathered from MySpace and outlines specific set of psychological principles for the analysis. The RHM is intentionally designed to incorporate some aspects of the CMC tradition (such as the hyperlink and the overall use of statistics) whilst combining a 'mash-up' of psychological principles and the overall approach of the constructionist approach.

Chapter 6 will discuss the ethical considerations of studying MySpace. This chapter will be divided into two parts: The first looks at the exact ethical procedures that were taken in this project and the second is a wider discussion of Internet research as a whole. This explores the relationship between Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and the precautions that need to be made when studying the Internet. The guiding premise for the second part of this chapter is that the over-emphasis on Internet ethics has distorted the importance of 'good judgement' in the design of social science research. This discussion will also allow for an introduction of the work of Emmanuel Levinas who features at varying moments in the later stages of the thesis.

Chapter 7 marks the first of the analytic chapters. It features the analysis of the data using a quantitative approach. This will look for basic descriptive statistics in the data including: the number of friends, the number of blogs, the number of profile changes and other forms of information from the profile. The analysis will then focus on areas that require further statistical investigation. The findings of a quantitative nature will provide a base for the qualitative aspects of the investigation.

Chapter 8 will form the beginning of the qualitative analysis and will look at extracts from the wall section of the profile. The data will be analysed by linking the wall posts together using the individual time signatures that accompany each post. This will be the first opportunity to explore the issue of the relational self in the MySpace interaction. Chapter 8 focuses on the relational aspects of the wall posts and explore the experience of communicating via the wall. In order to develop this argument, Celia Lury's (1998) ideas on 'interiority with intimacy' offer a way of explaining the link between closeness and distance that are formed in the communication on the wall.

Chapter 9 will continue to analyse communication from the wall. This chapter will take an alternative approach to using the data and will be characteristic of the conversation analytic tradition where the interaction is subjected to a fine-grained level of analysis. This chapter is fundamentally about the study of identity and will explore notion 'place-identity' (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000) in the use of MySpace wall posts. The analysis explores the way MySpace users perform a sense of 'locatedness' in the way they communicate on the wall.

Chapter 10 will focus on the practice of blogging. This will analyse the entirety of the visual and textual aspects of the page. This will allow for a discussion of subjectivity through the way that users perform a reflexive turn in the use of the blogs. The blog is recognised as a form of confession that offers an alternative to the majority of the literature that uses a self-disclosure explanation. The issue of blogging will be explored through Foucauldian notions of technology of self and self-care. The concept of the *Brand Me* will explore the way that users continually re-brand themselves across the use of the blog.

Chapter 11 is the first of the analytic chapters that is devoted to the practice of profile changing. This will explore the way profile changes to the perform something of a social function. In using the data from the statistical analysis to recognise those users who update their profile most frequently, this analysis will explore the way profile changing can be understood as a form of communication. This chapter will return the actual embodied practice of the self. Here, the aim is return to a notion of community as providing a set of external normatives that can be mobilised through the changes in the profile. This relates to the imagined sense of the community and develops the concept of the *hoped-for* self.

Chapter 12, the final analytic chapter, will be further interested in the phenomenon of profile changing in MySpace. This chapter explores the narrative function of the profile and explores a rationale for the need to keep the self moving. This will investigate the practice of profile changing in terms of the self *in potential*. As with the previous chapter, the claims will be supported with empirical evidence and located in the actual use of the self in MySpace pages. The data will be connected to an array of post-modern thinkers, namely Haraway and Baudrillard, to comment on the overall nature of communication in MySpace.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter serves as an introduction to the area of social network sites. MySpace is one of the most popular SNSs where users create their own personal profiles to be shared with a global network of other users. In MySpace, millions of users are engaged in a new form of communication that uses a specific set of practices (blogging, wall posting etc.). Each of these practices is managed through the central hub of the profile page and the use of MySpace is managed via this central page. There is a growing level of research that is focused on the use of SNSs. However, many studies are grounded in a particular view of social psychology (even if not explicitly stated) of experimental or sociological traditions. These views conceptualise identity and the self in the particular way.

The focus of this thesis is an investigating the experience of using MySpace, one which offers an opportunity to revisit notions of the self, identity and community. This will draw upon a constructionist form of social psychology and focus on the way users actively constitute the self and identity in MySpace through their everyday social relations. In bringing this form of psychology to bear, the investigation is focused on a multiplicity of selves and the relational constitution of experience in MySpace. The following chapter will briefly explore the long contested history of the self in psychology. This will offer a constructionist approach as a contemporary basis for the investigation of MySpace.

Chapter 2:

Self and Identity

2.1 The Self in Psychology: Some Historical Issues

The question of 'who am I?' is one of the oldest in the modern world. In asking this question one is typically searching for *the self*. In the early use of this term there was a tradition of searching for a personal form of the self. This could be linked with western notions of an individual self that came from reflection under Enlightenment. The basis of Enlightenment was a faith in human reason that developed from the work of Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes is primarily associated with the work of rationalism where the notion of 'self mastery' is achieved through reason and thought (or cognition). For Descartes, cognition is elevated to a larger moral order where the mind and is separated from the felt experience of the body.

2.2.1 The Personal Self

The impact of the Descartes' form of cognition flows into many different psychological theories. The notion of the *personal self* describes an explanation of the self that biologically inherited and located in an individual set of cognitions. These cognitions are considered separate from any form of external influence and the self is therefore created by the accumulation of experience in the mind. From this perspective, the self is seen as an individual 'project' where to any form of change fundamentally requires a psychological process. This can still be seen in many of the popular forms psychology the follow a commitment to the self that explains how change is reliant on a level of self-reflection. The self is therefore related to the reflexive capacity of the mind that could be disciplined through methodical, rational action.

One could even consider the current form of cognitive psychology as direct descendent of Cartesian thinking. This explores the self through the study of thought, emotion and perception, all of which are perceived to have an underlying structure in cognition. In using this notion of a person, the self becomes grounded in the personality traits or types. This constitutes a personal form of the self that is part of an individual set of characteristics. This theory has developed to allow for the allocation

of different personality types to the wider concept of the self (e.g., someone could be described as extrovert or introvert through the use of personality traits). Theories of personality attempt to formulate categories of the individual through a specific set of labels. This perspective rarely takes cultural or societal influences into consideration.

In a slightly different approach to cognitive psychology, the psychoanalytic tradition also explains the self in personal terms. Self-analysis is a central area of a Freudian approach to psychoanalysis. During Freud's work in the late part of the 19th century the self took on an entirely new direction and became part a tripartite theory that was divided between the conscious and the unconscious (consisting of the id, the ego and the superego). The work of psychoanalysis accentuates the possibility of a personal self that emphasises a notion of rationality. Similarly to the cognitive tradition, Freud rarely considered the affect of others in the multitude of various cases he examined and always referred to the internal workings of the mind as the source of the problem. This tradition overlooked the social impact on the individual and subsequently limited conceptions of the self.

2.2.2 The Social Self

The first signs of the *social* possibilities of the self emerged in different schools across psychology. The work of the US pragmatists in the late 19th century was against a reductionist form of psychology that focused purely on the individual. Even though this approach did not look at a thoroughly social conception of the self, it established an explanation as part of a dialogical set of relations. The birth of pragmatism was in the wake of the Darwinian revolution that aimed to develop a self-consciousness that was materialist as opposed to spiritual or substantial. William James, one of the early pragmatists and often cited as the father of modern psychology, argues that it is not that consciousness belongs to an entirely inner form of self due to the way it requires an evolutionary component (James, 1890). Humans have to evolve from experience, James argues, in order to better adjust to the environment. This is echoed in the work of Dewey (1922) who recognises the conscious as an *objective function* of the condition of existence. Consciousness is then part of a more complicated function of social behaviour that is reliant on an evolutionary component.

Mead (1934) advances the pragmatic approach in stating that the evolutionary aspects of the human consciousness are derived from a social context. Mead argues that individuals shape their own notion of the self by interpreting the actions of others

and acting upon their own impulses. The work of this Chicago School scholar is typically understood as a form of *social behaviourism*. The central concern of this approach is the relationship between the activity of a social group and the formation of an individual self. This approach focuses on the 'situational determinants' of behaviour and identifies the self as a social construction.

However, for Mead, language has to have an underlying source, a foundation on which it evolves. Mead argues that gestures formed that foundation. This perspective explains that language has grown out of a body of gestures and signals that form an elaborate code of meaning. Any symbol could then form a significant mode of communication and it is here where Mead's work has been tied with the tradition of *symbolic interactionism*. From this perspective, human beings respond to symbols and languages (or *social objects*) in interpersonal relations. Mead argues that humans are instinctive creatures that learn to shape their responses through social contact. For Mead, it is in these social activities that consciousness emerges.

Mead's work was expanded by Goffman and the sociological tradition in the mid 20th Century. Goffman offers a pragmatic notion of self that describes how individuals try to create, be it consciously or unconsciously, a response to the context of their surrounding situation. Goffman is famously recognised for the notion of the 'presentation of self' (1959) where the use of an actor metaphor represents the relationship between performative 'front stage' (front meaning the physical setting; its appearance and the manner of the actor) and the 'back stage' (the place where the preparation occurs). For an interaction to take place, according to Goffman, the social actor has the ability to choose their stage and set the scene. This 'dramaturgical' metaphor exemplifies the role-playing aspects of social interactions, as Goffman (1959: 241) writes:

> Underlying all social interaction there seems to be a fundamental dialectic. When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation. Were he to posses this information, he could know, and make allowances for, what will come to happen and he could give the other present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened self interest.

Goffman argues that the individual is *changed* by the interaction with others in the way that they are able to learn from a social encounter. It is through this ability that individuals are then able to demonstrate their 'enlightened self'. Goffman (1959) referred to this process as 'impression management': The ability to present oneself in a positive way after learning the nature of the other members of the group. The implications for a constructionist self will first be discussed through a set of alternative views on Goffman's ideas.

2.2.3 The Constructionist Self

It was not until the late 1970s and 80s that British psychology started to explore the social aspects of the self. Rom Harré develops the notion of a relational formation of the self that shows the extent to which Goffman's earlier use of the term 'dramaturgical' over-emphasises the *actor* behind the mask (this is similarly a poststructuralist criticism). Harré (1983) argues that the dramaturgical, role-playing aspects of the self are emphasised in the social formation of the self. Harré reworks the notion of social presence that Goffman embedded into the acting metaphor and recasts the theory as one of social and psychological interest. This is directly opposed to the singular possibilities of environmental contingencies. Harré develops the dramaturgical metaphor to explain how individuals are more like the *director* as opposed to the actor in their everyday lives, where people are constructing their performance in each moment. Harré explores the way that individuals have the ability to be jointly concerned with performance and critique in the same moment. Each role that one plays constitutes something of the self. Harré highlights an alternative position to the personal and the social forms of self, between a self-given and a self-made, where the self is *constructed*.

Harré (1988) argues that the self is characterised by learning roles and scripts that are a part of everyday activities. It is in our performance of social interaction that we are able to evaluate who we are. We become increasingly embedded in a world of others - a socially 'saturated' world (Gergen, 1991). Critical appreciation of the dramaturgical model paved the way for an alternative vision of the self that emphasises both the social and the psychological formation of the self. Through language and everyday conversations people are able to *construct* the self.

Goffman's work has been contrasted in recent times by a variety of work that tries to exemplify the complexity between the personal and the social. This constitutes a different view to the self from that of the social behaviourists and the later US pragmatists introduced earlier. A central event in this regard was the publication by Charles Taylor in 1989 of *The Sources of the Self*. This book exemplifies the way an individual is orientated towards a particular moral ethic. Taylor (1989) refers to his work as 'expressivist' as he is interested in the way a self-identity is *made* through a creative use of expression. This contrasts the work of Goffman and Mead in the conceptualisation of an underlying structure that *gives* people their self. Therefore, for Taylor, the self does not come from a mental reflection of social acts but from the expression of natural emotions, feelings and impulses.

Taylor recognises the importance between the individual and the social group as he explains that the self as reliant on different 'horizons of meaning' (drawn on the work of Gadamer). The horizons of meaning refer to the variable ways that people can express emotions in order to become an 'authentic individual'. For Taylor, it was not simply that the individual could react to different social objects because of the complex relationship between the personal and the social. Taylor argues that this is not a one-dimensional relationship between the social and the psychological which rely on a sense of expression. Taylor is aiming to forge a link between the notions of the self and the many artistic forms of creation.

For Taylor, the self is seen as an authentic creation that can only be achieved through the social relations with others. This work could also be seen a reaction to wider political issues of *social conformism* and the teachings of the Enlightenment period. From this perspective, a romantic or 'expressivist' approach is contrary to ideas on reason and morality. These ideas have resonance with the earlier work of James Dewey. Here, critical reflection has an emotional and temporal impact (Dewey, 1922). This is different to the version of the self from the work of sociology and the later pragmatist's viewpoint, where the individual is fundamentally responsible for the way that social objects are received. Dewey argues 'habits' are always acquired in a social context and they have the nature of that context entrenched within the social and historical relations in which they took place. This gives a more complex, multi-dimension notion of self, which has similarities with Taylor's work, and more specifically, recognises the power of the social context.

Many of these arguments have surfaced in post-modern conceptualisation of a multivocal self that carries a number of voices within us. This opposes the possibility of a psychological level of processing and focuses on the sense of dislocation that characterises the self in the modern period. Post-modernism and post-structuralism signal a re-shaping in the way we think about who we are and have subsequently impacted on different theories of the self. This has led to an erosion of self as a stable, unified entity to an explanation that emphasises the self as fragmented and 'decentred' (Hall, 1995). Burkitt (1991) argues that we have a number of overlapping 'social selves' that involves a multiple creation of selves that are not isolated in individual thought. Burkitt explains how social selves contain a vision to the future in terms of what they want to be. The self is fundamentally still about the way that we understand ourselves in terms of our own personal desires, however, these desires are constructed and performed at a social level. This concept of the self is supported by the constructionist approach.

From a constructionist perspective, there is an emphasis on looking at the border between the social and the psychological in action, where the role of language is central in the ability to understand shared experiences and interaction. Reformulations of this kind have ties with other critical movements in social psychology (see Brown, 2001; Hepburn, 2002; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, 2002; Parker, 1992; Stainton Rogers, 2003; Willig, 1999). The theory of social constructionism cemented many of the ideas of a social approach into one central location. To further explore the implications for the self it is necessary to fully consider the elements of social constructionism.

2.2 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is critical of traditional forms of psychology and social psychology that based our conception of the self as a set of assumptions that relate to an underlying cognition. Social constructionists favour the historical and cultural understanding of the way that people interact with the world. Knowledge is constructed between people and produced in action. Social constructionists place the function of language at centre-stage. This opposes the idea that individual attitudes, motivations and cognitions are responsible for what people do and say. Discursive Psychology (DP) provided the opportunity to re-visit areas of human behaviour that were predominantly dominated by cognitive traditions. One example is a series of

papers concerned with a contradictory approach to the cognitive appreciation of memory (Edwards & Middleton, 1986a, 1986b, 1988).

Social constructionism is an umbrella term that focuses on a range of discursive forms of investigation. DP is aimed towards exploring how a certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are achieved in interaction. At the heart of social constructionism is the idea that language and communication construct 'knowledge' and 'truth' where the use of language is crucial. Potter and Wetherell (1987) show how the different uses of the term 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter' shows the way that reality can be a product of a particular discourse or rhetoric. The category of 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter' cannot be judged for truth or accuracy but interpreted in the exact context of its usage[3].

Social constructionism incorporates a range of analytic procedures that promote the importance of language or discourse. Discourse analysis (DA), for example, is based on the analysis of language in interaction and stems from the influential work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). Gilbert and Mulkay used a 'contingent repertoire' to describe how people used language in constructive ways. This work was developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and the use of 'interpretative repertoires' and the analysis of 'talk' and 'text' to explain interaction as organised by a central metaphor around which clusters of terms are drawn upon to perform particular social actions. These ideas were accompanied by other work in this area, such as the work of Billig (1996) that argued for the rhetorical power of language in action. DA analyses the use of linguistic tools that allow accounts to be constructed in contextually appropriate ways. DA is also closely linked with the principles of conversation analysis that uses a close reading of the action orientation of language (Sacks, 1992; Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). In each of these areas the different constructions of people and events are brought into being through the use of language.

In 2003 (the same year MySpace was released in the UK) Lamerichs and Molder commented on a move from a cognitive to a discursive model of computer-mediated communication (a formal strand of Internet research that will be explored in Chapter 3). This involved a comprehensive move towards a discursive reorganisation of online social relationships (a similar strand of reasoning has also be used by Pearson, 2009). Lamerichs and Molder (2003) identify that identity is managed *in talk*

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[3] There is an issue of representation in the theory of social constructionism that will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

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through social environments and promoted the use of discursive methods in the study of online interaction. In an earlier piece, Susan Herring (1997) provides a 'how to' guide towards using DA in the analysis of data taken from online exchanges. Herring replicates many of the assumptions that have particular credibility with the traditional form discourse analysis. This shows the application of discursive methods in the analysis of online interaction. From the theory of social constructionism the self is defined by its actions in social practice. The self is then a discursive performance or construction in interaction. This notion of performance will feature as one of the new dialectics in constructionism.

2.3 Performance, Process and Multiplicity

The use of a *constructionist* approach is one that focuses on interaction and social processes. Recent dialectics in constructionism stress the importance of multiplicity, performance and process. Through the incorporation of these ideas the concept of the self will harness alternative theories to be contained under the remit of the constructionist approach. A brief discussion of performance, process and multiplicity will help to purify the constructionist position that is on offer in this thesis.

Performance (Butler, 1990b, 2004; Mol, 2002) is gathering pace as a way of addressing the 'complexity turn' in the social sciences (see Urry, 2005). Butler (1990b) argues that the self is a discursive practice, something we position in-talk, but moreover, it is also an expression of the context of the situation. Here, the use of performance is not only looking to address the action in language but it is approaching the inherent complexity of phenomena that is avoided in reductionist forms of social psychology. In using a performative metaphor, research is geared towards approaching the 'mess' in everyday interaction as opposed to the neatness of phenomena in experimental research (Law, 2004; Law & Urry, 2002). The performance metaphor is also apparent in other schools of thought including the field of Actor Network Theory (ANT).

ANT is a distinctive area of social theory that utilises a notion of performance. ANT is associated with the area of Science and Technology Studies (Latour, 1987, 1999; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). Law and Hassard (1999) state that there are two main 'stories' that lie at the heart of ANT: Firstly, there is a interest in semiotics and the way that entities gather their meaning through the interaction with other entities. Secondly, if one takes the first story on relational materiality to be true, once an entity

achieves a semiotic sense of materiality then it must continue that order through the *performance* of those relations. ANT focuses on the way that durability between relational materiality is achieved. It is the way this performance manages to affect others through a set of relational connections.

The performative formulations emphasise the interaction as a part of a *process*. The notion of process is at the centre of the work by Henri Bergson and his concept of *duration*. The concept of duration is, at its most basic level, interested in reformulating the concepts of time and human experience (Bergson, 1922/1999). Process philosophy requires the understanding that things are constantly in movement. This has implications for the way that one understands a notion of the as relationally constructed. Bergson recognises how even if a certain relationship will develop in a group this does not mean that it necessarily will. Therefore, people may stay closely tied to a social group because what it means to be a member is constantly changing. Social relationships function through an accepted amount of change. Massumi (2002) argues for the re-introduction of movement into existing constructionist positions. There is clearly a much wider interpretation of the work of Henri Bergson or ANT but the use here is in order to develop an argument that is synonymous with the new dialects of process and performance in the work of Judith Butler and others.

What is central to both process and performance (although not always explicitly stated) is the concept of *multiplicity*. People accept a fair amount of multiplicity in everyday interactions, and at a basic level, people will behave differently given the social group or situation that they find themselves in. However, the term multiplicity can take a more complex meaning. For example, one understanding, predominantly stemming from French social theory, explains multiplicity in terms of a multitude of channels through which an individual or a group is able to recognise itself. Halbwachs (1980) argues that even our most personal of thoughts or experience is, in fact, inherently social. As we pass between different social relations we form multiple layers of the self. There is a fundamental multiplicity of self that traverses the gap between chaos and order (cf. also Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2002; Middleton & Brown, 2005).

This integral level of multiplicity means that our experience is one that draws form a number of different sources. And yet, although each is dependent on the other, there are some circumstances where, what we might call the mediation, is radically inaccessible to some. The concept of multiplicity is central to the ideas of Michel

Foucault. Foucault, like other post-modern thinkers, argues the importance of the primacy *discourses*. Foucault (1972, 1973) recognises how discourse produces a set of powers with regulatory control over identity (otherwise known as 'disciplinary power'). In Foucault's account, 'subjects' are produced through the available dominant discourses that are tied to regulatory systems of power/knowledge (terms that are rarely separated in Foucault's work). From this position, there is no subject *per se* but a multiplicity of discourses that constitute the subject. Experience is not entirely of our own choosing as it relies on an available set of discourses within a given set of channels. These discourses reproduce social inequalities that shape the individual in a certain way. Identity, following Foucault, is situated within a series of representations that mediate predominant ideologies through language and other symbolic systems.

Foucault is also concerned with the notion of *normalisation* that can similarly aid the discussion of multiplicity. For Foucault, normalisation is the production of a moral code which comes to serve as the standard for explaining any given aspect of human conduct. In some of Foucault's early work, he focuses on the way that 'reason' became the moral standard that all of 'unreason' was to be judged by (Foucault, 1989). Here, the absence of reason, or unreason, was the main construction of madness. Foucault indicates how such views are culturally dependent on a specific interpretation of reason and the production of power relations. For Foucault, the power of the discourse does not come from the individual but from the culture that the individual is immersed in. The use of a particular discourse *constitutes* the individual. This work demonstrates the multiplicity of subject positions that are a product of the cultural and historical discourse in action.

Process, performance and multiplicity offer a way of developing the central ideas of the constructionist approach. In using these three terms the interaction is focused, not only on the formation of social processes, but furthermore, on how these processes reflect something of the context of the experience. It is our connectedness that grants us this experience as opposed to a unique, coherent and unchanging sense of self. However, as Brown and Middleton (2005) argue, we consistently overlook the movement between cultural resources and our own experience. This work is derived from the work of Halbwachs where he famously argues 'we are unaware that we are but an echo' (1980:44). The ability to jointly connect with a range of cultural resources is typically recognised as an inherent level of similarity between the group

members. Therefore, in trying to be different, many people are drawn to be the same. In using this conception of the self, the aim is to accept the sense of movement, or the impact of the 'echo', in the conceptualisation of the way people mediate the self. This will look to explore a sense of movement instead of accepting it as part of the interaction.

Furthermore, there is an acceptance of the multiple forms of the self that are constantly being performed in social exchanges. This acknowledges the inherent level of process in constructing the self and the way relations are constantly in a state of motion. In bring motion to the fore the construction of the self is not treated as an individual activity, and even if it may feel as such, due to the way it is inherently connected to a feeling of group presence. Even in our attempts to show a certain difference this would be based on collective realisation of what it means to be different. Therefore, in using the concepts in this way, the study of the self in MySpace is able to explore the fluidity of social relations in the online forms of communication.

However, as way of further exploring this position, it is necessary to define the differences and similarities between concepts of the self and identity. In defining the multiple self as something that involves specific reference to collective forms of engagement, there is a need to further define the use of the term identity. Furthermore, some authors, such as Foucault in the above description, use the term 'identity' interchangeably with the term 'subject'. This presents a wider conceptual use of the term in a way that encompasses issues of power and knowledge. In this thesis, the term identity is predominantly used to explain the way that individuals locate themselves within an available set of identity discourses. Identity is then the actual performance of a connection with a particular group. These identities don not simply unfold into our experience but are part of an active construction through social relations. Further clarification of this definition will be outlined in the following section.

2.4 Identity

In the above discussion of process, multiplicity and performance illustrate new areas of constructionism that will aid the investigation of the experience of MySpace. However, there is one distinction that is further necessary when using an approach of this kind, that is, the difference between the self and identity. In using a

constructionist definition it would be simple to conflate the two by explaining both identity and the self as produced in interaction. This section will expunge the differences between the self and identity.

Social constructionists view identity as constructed through language and social relations where people actively construct identities which change over time, culture and circumstance. The earlier discussion of the differences between the use of the term 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) equally apply to the construction of identities as they are understood, from a constructionist perspective, as socially produced and dependent on local contexts of meaning. Therefore, unlike theories of identity (social identity theory, for example), there can be no separation between psychological processes and social relations, they are both effectively constructs that people use to negotiate everyday interactions. Furthermore, social constructionists are not just interested in looking at the difference between certain groups as the disparity *within* them.

Constructionists also focus on identity as a process that opposes the possibility of a real-me or of an authentic possibility of identity (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Identity is still recognised as the basic relationship one forms through the multiple relations of work colleagues, religious groups, neighbours, political groups and other relational connections. However, in constructionist terms, all of these realities are created together and constitute their own practices of relating. Like the self, identity is not an internal function based on our own biological dispositions or social labels, such as 'black', 'working class' or 'adolescent'. Alternatively, there is a focus on the way these expressions become constituted in everyday action. Identity is the connection to a multiplicity of social threads that are ongoing and managed at an everyday level. For each of us, there is an overlapping multitude of discourses that are constantly at work constructing and producing our identity.

However, this is not to say that identity is somehow accidental. From looking at the way people invoke certain identity categories at different times, this shows how people are able to perform a link with these identity categories. The way different individuals promote a certain kind of identity category is known as 'social positioning' (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Langenhove, 1999). People are able to position themselves as part of a desired identity category. The concept of positioning also explains the way people are different from one identity category to the next (e.g. a school child may act very differently when in the presence of a teacher as opposed

to his/her friends). Identity is then dependent on the way a person is positioned. Identity is accomplished and negotiated through the construction of discourse to achieve a particular position within a group (see Harré, 1998).

Similarly, for each of these multiple situations there is an inherently 'good' or 'bad' way that a person should act; one that relates to the expectations of the current category of identity. Shotter (1984) refers to the term 'accountability' to describe the way that a social group invokes a sense of what is generally accepted as good action as a member of the group. The association to a particular identity implies the way people should act through certain discourses which hold group members accountable for their actions. This shows that the membership to a certain identity categories implies a set form of actions from that position.

This position accepts that there are numerous forms of multiple, de-centred identities. Different identities can be constructed in response to the same event in everyday life. This rejects the possibility of one core identity and explains that people have the ability to connect with a range of possible identities that become mobilised in interaction. Edwards (1998) argues how being 'married-with-kids' performs a kind of identity position that is different to other married parents who do not construct themselves in this way. In using this term it may signal a relationship that has particular sense of responsibility, or, and probably more likely, is that the current position is one that could benefit from some 'time off'. Identity, therefore, is not a fixed form or an achievement, but a resource that can be used in interaction.

Identity is clearly also about the issue of power relations. The study of identity is also linked to wider issue of dominant cultural discourse. Foucault's (1979a) famous genealogical reading of the history of homosexuality shows how the introduction of this term related to a particular cultural usage. The discussion of the term homosexual came into being at a particular time and as a consequence homosexuality was talked about by doctors and nurses through a new available discourse. This discourse provided an *identity* that gave a label to a range of cultural practices. Therefore, the function of the discourse does not just describe but it *defines* the identities of particular individuals in the group.

Burr (1995) argues that we should think of the self and identity as inextricably linked, and consequently, the dual term 'self-identity' is sometimes used to describe the combination of two terms (see also Abell & Stokoe, 2001). Therefore, the self and identity do have certain differences but it is also important to recognise the direct

connection between the two terms. Identity categories provide a way of locating the self in a particular set of norms. Identity is then central to the way that we make sense of ourselves and has a separate set of issues that relate to the management of a group presence.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Discussions of the self span a range of disciplines and have undergone a series of modifications over time. This chapter initially characterises the early history in this debate as the difference between the *self given* vs. the *self made*. The self given, or the personal self, relates to an individual version of the self that is biologically inherited and contained within a person. In contrast, the self-made, or the sociological version of the self, exemplifies the possibility of the social or environmental contingencies in understanding the self. However, the self made approach still recognised a fundamental role of psychological action, which was somehow separate from the influence from a social domain. In a third turn, and as a way of combining the social and the psychological, this chapter reviews the formation of constructionist version of the self that focuses on the multiple versions of the self and the performance of interaction. This notion of the self raises the boundary between the social and the psychological.

In this discussion many of the previous attempts at understanding the online self can be characterised as using one of the first two positions (the self-given or the self-made). For example, many pieces of research treat the social aspects of computer based interactions as a social phenomenon that treated the mind and body as separate entities that allowed for a 'second self' on the screen (Turkle, 1995). This would unite with a personal, cognitive form of the self that separates different forms of life into distinct modalities. Similarly, the majority of research that is informed by the notion of a 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959) develops a predominantly sociological conception of the self. However, this thesis takes the recent work in constructionism as the intellectual point of departure for studying the self and identity in MySpace. This includes a focus of the constructionist approach in terms of performance, process and multiplicity.

From a constructionist perspective, the self is understood as an ongoing practice of jointly constituting meaning through the interactions with others. The self is considered to be constructed at performed at a social level where it can never be

produced in isolation and involves a multitude of overlapping performances. Identity is similarly constructed at a social level but refers to the practice of connecting with a specific form of identity category. The formation of identity is concerned with mobilising a connection to identity categories. MySpace is a natural setting which offers access to the experience of constructing the self and identity in modern forms of online communication. This thesis will explore the construction of the self and identity in MySpace.

The focus of this thesis is the experience of using MySpace. In order to capture this experience the analysis will focus on the performance of the communicative actions in MySpace. The specific social practices that allow this form of communication (wall communication, blogging etc.) will be examined in terms of the capacity to mediate notions of the self, identity and community. The aim is to build an empirical and conceptual account of how users choose to present themselves through these new forms of communication. In doing so, the concept of a *mediated community* will be identified as a way of characterising the specific construction of community in an electronic world (outlined in Chapter 4). However, first this thesis must explore the well-established tradition of computer-mediated communication (CMC). This area has grown as an established approach to conducting psychological research using the Internet and will offer certain insights to be continued into the current study of MySpace.

Chapter 3:

Theorising the Internet

3.1 Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

> CMC is communication that takes place between human beings via the
> instrumentality of the internet. (Herring, 1996:1)

The umbrella term computer-mediated communication (CMC) describes the
transmission of information and communication via a range of computer based
technologies. CMC is a growing field of research that explores the way people
communicate online in terms of external measures including: speed of interaction,
visual anonymity, differences in time, and the number/quality of social cues in an
interaction. CMC research began in the early 1960s, in the time of the first recorded
Email exchange, and has continued to be interested in the amount of information that
people can communicate through a computer. This area of research views the
computer, not as an opportunity to leave the real world behind (as with cyberspace),
but as a chance to do many real world through a computer. The CMC tradition can be
associated with the rise of experimental forms of social psychology, and despite the
obvious differences between CMC and the current study, there is still a vast amount
research that can be mobilised from CMC tradition to be used in the study of
MySpace.

CMC is interested in relationships that can be formed through the computer.
December (1996) argues that CMC is essentially about the way humans are able to
communicate via the use of the computer. This shows the importance of the context
through which people engage with the computer environment. The tradition of CMC
involves a number of different movements over time including: the social presence
tradition, the social cognitive approach and the social identity model of the
deindividuation effects (SIDE). Each of these approaches relates to chronological
point in the history of CMC. These approaches will now be discussed in more detail.

3.2 The Social Presence Tradition

This section will include the discussion three influential approaches in the social presence tradition of CMC: the social presence model (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976), the media richness model (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and the reduced social cues approach (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). These approaches represent the tradition of studying the Internet in terms of physical presence. It is worth highlighting that many of these studies came before the rise of SNSs and have later been coined as the first attempt to conduct a social psychology of the Internet (Wallace, 1999). This field is strongly related to the growth of experimental approach to social psychology in the wider setting. The consequences of this connection will be explored throughout this discussion.

The social presence model was developed by scholars in the Communication Studies Group at University College London. Short, Williams and Christie (1976) define social presence as one broadly overarching term that refers to a fundamental difference in the way people communicate through a computer. The model represents how a low level of visual interaction, via the use of a computer, leads to a low level of social presence. This low social presence then limits the use of interactional markers that lead to an effective form of communication. Therefore, face-to-face interaction provides a high level of social presence with a high level of emotive behaviour. Even though the social presence model was developed studying telecommunications, it has been cited as an appropriate model to predict the social influence in modern online interaction (cf. Cheon & Ahn, 2009).

The second theory that argued for the importance of social presence is the Media Richness model (Daft & Lengel, 1984). This theory defines a range of factors that determine an appreciation of media 'richness' where, once again, the computer was seen to have a low frequency of media richness and other technologies (such as the telephone) were deemed to have a high level of media richness. If a person can take immediate feedback from the interaction then this is considered to have a high level of media richness. An appreciation of media richness leads to the ability to choose an appropriate means of communication. As with the social presence model, a face-to-face message is considered to bestow the highest amount of media richness. The media richness model promotes the assumption that any interaction that does not have a high level of media richness would be impersonal and distant. Thurlow, Lengel and

Tomic (2004: 50) explain that 'nothing, it was feared, could really compare with the detail, fluidity, warmth, intimacy and sociability of face-to-face communication'.

The final approach in the social cues genre is the reduced social cues approach (see Kielser, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; McGuire, Kiesler, 1987). This work is different to the previous two models as it is directly relates to CMC. Sara Kiesler, one of the key writers in this area, is widely recognised as a social psychologist that uses behavioural and social science research methods to focus on the issue of CMC. Her work focuses on the way individuals use the computer to complete task-orientated problems (see Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). There is a continuing theme in her work that draws form organisational psychology and implies that computers are predominantly used for work-based activities. This is because, at the time, the computer was primarily only accessible to large businesses. Kiesler shows how a reduction in social presence leads to a reduction in leadership, power and status in the workplace (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). The reduced social cues (RSC) approach explains that the lack of cues in CMC leads to an increase in deregulated, uninhibited behaviour. This theory argues that a reduction in social cues allows for an increase in ungoverned 'risky' behaviour. The RSC approach explains the absence of social cues as the reason for a lack of social norms in computer environments.

Early research in the workplace found that computer usage results in a democratisation of communication due to visual anonymity. This implies that communication via a computer empowers people to disregard existing communicative hierarchies. This finding was reinforced by other research that showed how CMC allows a wider contribution from employees (see Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). However, Ahuja and Carley (1998) argue that the use of computer does provide early signs of decentralisation, but after following the communication over a length of time, their research showed how CMC merely supported standard hierarchical communication patterns. This presents the idea that CMC could almost buckle under the strain of pressure from hierarchies and eventually lend itself to satisfying older norms. Brigham and Corbett (1997:32) also recognise the use of CMC as a managerial tool in the way that 'the email network can be conceptualised as an agent of organisational power in the sense that it mediates and constitutes employee relationships and behaviour'.

The two competing theories are balanced by the idea that CMC is not *intrinsically* apt to enhance democracy in organisations (Mantovani, 1994). This means that CMC may reflect a decentralisation in hierarchy but only when it fits with the specific contextual arrangement of the current cultural climate. Underpinning many of the arguments that developed from the RSC model is how society and organisation manage higher levels of CMC in existing networks. For example, that messages marked with 'low priority' are less likely to be ignored than those marked with 'high priority' (Introna, 1999). This research presents the possibility that the lack of interest in high priority messages represents the remerging hierarchy and a comparative resistance towards the old social order.

The social presence tradition represents an early connection between experimental psychology and the study of the computer in the workplace. This approach understands the computer as a tool for organisational behaviour. Lea (1992) recognises how the RSC models fail to recognise the social use of the computer and treats communication in purely 'individualistic' terms. This aligns with the cognitive framework in psychology more broadly. However, as the Internet became more popular, it was difficult to overlook the social implications of computer technology and later CMC theories included the social aspects of using a computer. This combined the social aspects of online interactions with the cognitive framework of the RSC approach. The elements of the 'social cognitive' approach will be explored in the following section.

3.3 Social Cognitive Approach

Joseph Walther (1992, 1994, 1996) proposed the social information processing model (SIP) as a way of combining the social and the cognitive in the study of CMC. Walther (1992) states that even though CMC interaction initially appears restrict emotive behaviour, users develop creative means to replace the lack of non-verbal cues in CMC. For Walther, this could take the form of an electronic paralanguage, as way of transforming the basic text into meaningful units of expression (also known as emoticons). Walther proposes that through a strategic ability to change the meaning invested in CMC people can create a social bond that rivals face-to-face communication. However, Walther argues that text based CMC takes longer for relationships to materialise because of the time it takes to compensate for the lack of 'non-verbal' signals. In the 1990s, the rise of the SIP model made it difficult to

support the aforementioned RSC approach as this theory countered the idea that human presence controlled the success of an interaction.

The SIP model argues that individuals are able to make judgments based on whatever information is available to them through the computer. From this perspective, even when there is a reduced amount of cues in online communication, this does not withhold the ability to make value judgments based on the given amount of information. This involves reacting to a range of biographical information that is available in the interaction and by the judgements made by other members of the community. Walther (1996) demonstrates that even if there is a lack of information that users will be able to reach a judgement about other users based on the limited amount of information. There are clear links with the SIP model and the work of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Social identity theory (SIT) is couched within the social cognition paradigm and is mostly concerned with how people relate with others in social groups. SIT focuses on the social self that is acquired through the membership of different social groups and then processed on a cognitive level. This theory proposes that an individual's psychological processes are altered through group settings as people come to identity themselves with a particular social group. Most notably, when a person considers their group to be doing well they are able to feel positive about their own social identity. This is classically shown through the dissemination of an 'in-group' or an 'out-group'.

Research in CMC is typically orientated towards experimental observations that supported similar findings to the social identity theory. CMC investigations involve assigning participants to an arrangement of different stimulus groups and measuring their decisions based on a predetermined set of criteria. There is the familiar sign of the hypothesis testing logic that is inherent to cognitive psychology in the majority of CMC research. This allows experimenters to control different stimulus in the computer environment. Questionnaires are also used in a number of studies to access large samples of computer users (see Lea, Spears & Groot, 2001). Each of these methods gauges a respondent's attraction to being in different social groups and is geared towards exploring the notions of self-categorisation, group perceptions and group relations. This shows a link between CMC and experimental forms of social psychology.

Walther (1992) particularly focused on the interpersonal messages that people use to define their online relationships, in what he called, the 'relational communication'. This is particularly geared towards understanding the relational communication in organisational settings (as with RSC approach). From this perspective, the computer is a way of completing a set of work related practices which are often found to have a high level of 'relational communication'. Even though CMC is found to be more disinhibited in the early communication, eventually flatten-outs over time and in some experimental groups it has even been found to surpass the face-to-face group in terms of effective relational communication (Walther, 1992). For this omission, Walther concludes that the method may be ineffectual in capturing the dynamic relations in online communities.

In a later piece of research, Tidwell and Walther (2002) use an adaptation of the 'uncertainty reduction theory' (based on the work of Berger & Calabrese, 1975) to show how greater levels of reduction strategies are used in CMC compared with face-to-face interactions. This study attempts to operationalise a difference between 'mediated' and 'unmediated' relationships. The CMC groups represent the strictly mediated form of communication. In this experiment participants were instructed to get to know one another through either the face-to-face methods or via a CMC condition. The results supported the SIP model through the way that, over time, the participants in the CMC group managed to gain knowledge at the same level as the face-to-face condition.

The concept of mediation is treated as the relational communication that the user is able to take from the environment. Similar studies in this area show that nearly 30% of messages show some form of emotional content in CMC (Rice and Love, 1987). Many researchers also focus on the time spent online as an indicator of a personal level of communication (Walther et al., 2001). This shows how relational communication becomes a cognitive area of investigation throughout the work of CMC. The relationship is characterised through the way to reproduce a particular form of communication. Even in the attempt to reify some form of emotional content, as shall be seen in the following approach, there is a drive to reproduce emotion as a particular indicator of mediated communication. This has ties with the cognitive, experimental version of psychology at the time.

Many of the studies in the social cognitive tradition continued to focus on a psychology of work-based computer mediated environments. However, as the impact of social identity theory took further hold of CMC ideas, many of the new developments in social identity theory were also incorporated into CMC research. This is most clearly seen in the use of the term 'deindividuation'. In social identity theory the notion of 'deindividuation' (Festinger et al., 1952) explains the way an individual would conduct anti-normative behaviour due to the protection of the group identity. This opposed the social cognitive tradition as it could not explain the way an individual could be guided by a group norm (Thurlow et al., 2004). Furthermore, this confounded the idea of the autonomous self that was able to shape their own individuality through their social engagements. The impact of deindividuation led to the creation of the SIDE model in CMC literature.

3.4 The SIDE Model

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) is based on a collection of works by Spears and Lea in the early 1990s. The SIDE model is intended to avoid earlier criticisms by incorporating the concept of deindividuation from social psychology. The SIDE approach treats social identity and personal identity as separate entities that individuals can switch between depending on a particular context. The relationship between the two types of identity lies on a continuum where social identity is at one end and personal identity is at the other. According to this model, people have the ability to recognise when circumstances are more important on a personal level, compared to, when a social identity may be more favourable from a social perspective. People could then switch between the different forms of identity depending on the situation. The SIDE model explains that individuals think and act in these different ways regardless of whether they are online or offline.

The nature of CMC requires many groups to communicate through existing networks (i.e. organisational affiliation, conference lists etc.) which meant that a switch to social identity was a good way to identify with a certain group (Trevino et al., 1987). From the SIDE approach, a move to a social identity allows people to feel like they were part of a group even if they had little or no contact with other group members. It was found that even when social categorical information is relatively sparse, people have the ability to recognise a social group from a minimal amount of information (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). This was related to the findings in social

identity theory of the 'minimal group paradigm' (Tajfel, 1970). The SIDE model argues that individuals could switch to social form of identity with only a minimal amount of information. The SIDE model states that individuals could choose when to be social in both online and offline environments.

However, it was not until the late 1990s that the negative aspects of the Internet featured in CMC discourse. This was not in a direct criticism of the SIDE model but it became clear that some users might not always use the Internet to an entirely positive gain (as was suggested by the SIDE theory). Therefore, this would show that users could actively avoid choosing the positive social action in order to upset or annoy another member of an online community. *Flaming* is the widely recognised term for the abusive use of Internet. Flaming symbolises the potentially negative possibilities of the various growing forms of online communication. It shows that while many scholars have been focussing on the ability to form groups online there was the possibility that many users might see the Internet as an opportunity to reject the values of a particular group.

3.5 Recent use of the Social Cognitive Approach

More recently, the CMC tradition is focussing on the social application of computer-based communication. In recent CMC research the social aspects of communication are of particular interest and the impact of Web 2.0 technology is providing new environments for contemporary versions of the SIP theory. Walther et al., (2008) argue that SNSs allow people to make value judgements (as with the SIP) from the communication that takes places in the wall. This explores the way that people form value judgments of Facebook profiles through the information that has been posted by other users. In this study Walther uses a concept of 'social attractiveness' to gauge how well the profiles are read by other Facebook users.

For this experiment, the participants were sent a URL (which they had created) that would direct them to a particular Facebook profile. The profile is one of a range of profiles that represents different experimental conditions. The different profiles accounted for a range of social and physical attractiveness. On beginning the study, the participants web browser is automatically directed to a Facebook profile and they are asked to rate the profile for both social attractiveness and physical attractiveness. The participant is instructed to form an impression about the profile in order to judge what kind of person might have such a profile.

Walther et al. (2008) displayed the number of friends on the (fake) Facebook profiles as somewhere between 102 to 902. The results show that the low number of friend's condition records an equally low rate of social attractiveness. Similarly, a high number of friends on the profile page lead to a positive impression of the profile owner. As part of the earlier SIP theory, Walther and Parks (2002) explain the importance of the 'warranting value' in constructing and attributing different value judgements. This relates to whether the information is provided by the actual author themselves or by members of the surrounding community. Walther et al., (2009) find evidence for the warranting value in Facebook as there is a high amount of status to be gained by wall posts left from other users. Therefore, a large amount of wall posts would lead to a positive judgement from other visitors to the profile. The importance of the profile photograph is also found to be of great importance to the ability to rate physical attractiveness.

In a separate investigation (Tom Tong, Heide, Langwell & Walther, 2008) the issue of physical attractiveness is given more attention in SNS usage. In this piece the impression formation in Facebook profiles are located in the use of profile photographs, and again, the study is conducted by creating fake websites that allow participants to make judgments based on a number of conditions. This study shows that the profile owner is judged on the attractiveness of their friends. It was also found that physical attractiveness does not impact on the task competence (this relates back to the history of CMC that only saw the Internet as a work-based environment). Tom Tong et al., (2008) conclude that many of judgments people make in new SNS are based on the comments and information that has been added to the profile by other community members. This research shows the continued success of combining CMC with movements in social psychology. The experimental method is one of the main paradigms for understanding behaviour in new SNSs and forms a distinct strand in Internet research.

There is also a growing area of CMC research that makes use of the hyperlink between pages to show a visual description of the network connections. This enables CMC researchers to see the how different users are connected across the globe and is able to address some of the questions surrounding who people are able to contact and how many connections are maintained by most users. This continues the earlier aspects of the CMC approach that was primarily interested in the physical shape of the network.

3.6 The Hyperlink

New forms of CMC research have also been concerned with a form of social network analysis (SNA) that allows for a visual representation of an online network. SNA involves studying how a set of people, organisation or other social entity (commonly known as a set of nodes) are connected through some form of relationship (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). SNA is the research procedure for analysing structures in a social system based on the relationships between the nodes (Park, 2003). In online interactions the hyperlinks between different networks reflects the structure of online social relationships. SNA is popular in exploring wider sociological phenomenon (Wellman, 1992).

The SNA approach focuses on relations and exchanges in terms of sustainability, direction and strength (Garton et al., 1997). SNA has a set of techniques for determining how people and groups relate to each other in a network. This has a number of definitions for describing the behaviour of network members based on their positions or connections, including tightly bounded, diversified, or constricted (knoke & Kuklinski, 1982; Scott, 2000; Wellman, 1997). SNA aims to provide both a visual and a mathematical analysis of human relationships. The visual representation of the social network will graphically illustrate the relationships in terms of strength and relation. The work in SNA shows that the hyperlink can provide a physical description of a set of relations.

However, the hyperlink also appears to have some interest in a qualitative form of analysis. This looks to understand the hyperlink in more expressive terms. Beaulieu (2005:186) notices how 'a hyperlink can be considered a special kind of expression, both functional and symbolic'. Middleton and Brown (2005) notice how hyperlinks on a family Websites give motion to the images in a way that constitutes experience. Middleton and Brown (2005) argue that images are *spatialised* through the hyperlink process in a way that is not only a physical structure but represents the subjective form of interaction that can be maintained through a hyperlink. When people use these hyperlinks they do not think and act in terms of physicality but in the social action they perform. Given that this research does not come under the official remit of CMC it is able to clarify the wider interest in this subject and illustrate the potential for the hyperlink to be explored in more progressive ways.

3.7 Chapter Summary

There are obviously a number of differences between the CMC method and the constructionist form of investigation that will inform the majority of this thesis. For example, CMC theorists speak highly of an individual capacity for decision making processes that relies heavily on perceptual mechanisms, attribution and cognition. CMC research also has a close tie with social cognitive theories (SIT) that explains how a role in online group settings is independently measured by a separate psychological process. In contrast, a constructionist view would take a different view of the role of psychological processes where online environments are not seen as window into cognitive or behavioural processes but as a discrete phenomenon in their own right.

However, despite these differences, the history of CMC research is able to contribute to the current investigation of MySpace in a number of ways. Firstly, the wide-scale following of CMC theory reifies the study of new SNSs and develops the need for further research on the social capacities of computer environments. Secondly, it locates the beginning of a communication as a point of particular interactional significance. In following the CMC tradition, the start of the conversation is considered to dictate the future state of the communication and forms of impression of the user. Thirdly, it identifies the role of other users as pivotal to understanding ourselves in online settings. This is shown through the relational connections providing a collective presence in online exchanges (e.g. in the way profile owners were judged by the input from other members).

Finally, and in a more practical sense, the use of the hyperlink provides a tangible application in developing a method for the study of MySpace. Each of these points shows, given the difference between the two positions, that there are many ways that the current investigation can benefit from the CMC research tradition. In a more general sense, the research in CMC is able to demonstrate that the computer is a distinct form of mediation that acts as a direct intermediary in an interaction. In the following chapter the aim is to further this notion of mediation in a way that tries to dissolve the strict boundaries of the computer. The notion of *mediated community* will be explored as a way of defining the collective activity in MySpace. This topic forms the basis of the following chapter.

Chapter 4:

Mediated Community

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the main aim is to revisit the relationships that people can form through a computer in order to recognise how an alternative approach to viewing interaction could open-up a space for a constructionist version of self and identity. This will need to displace boundaries of the 'individual' and 'the computer' and reconsider the concept of the online community. This chapter aims to orientate towards a version of community that accentuates the ever-changing, multiple possibilities of the self and identity. In doing so, ideas from cyberspace literature and CMC will combine to define the *mediated community*.

4.2 Distorting Computational Boundaries

What if we were to think of the computer as a part of a wider material culture? Could one consider communication through a computer as somehow shaped by the specific practices that are embedded in this form of interaction? Theorists of material culture are keen to show how our connection with culture is shaped by the prosthetic nature of new technologies. In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* de Certeau (1984) shows that people conform to the dominant social formations while all the time looking for subtle ways to create freedom within that system (he refers to them as 'tactical raiders'). This argument shows how technology does not affect people in a simple one-way relationship where they are passive to technological developments. People are always looking for new ways to create their own space through technology. Booth (2008) supports this finding in his assessment of MySpace users as 'textual poachers'.

Classically, Donna Haraway is one of the most widely recognised authors of cyberculture studies for her fascination with questioning intellectual domains. Haraway (1985) argues that meanings are encoded in technology in different ways and all machines have a 'material-semiotic' essence that is reflected in their form. Haraway is most famous for her work on *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). This book is

dedicated to moving beyond the traditional notions of human and machine and although Haraway's work has a range of subliminal meanings, there is a core theme of the computer as an object that does not stand alone from our everyday activities as 'they are everywhere and they are invisible' (1985: 193).

Haraway explains that objects are not fully contained within their physical boundaries. People and places shape the way we understand technology and our interpretation of any object will never be located in one meaningful unit. Haraway notes that objects are not just what they *mean* but they are also the objects in themselves that have semiotic qualities of their own. A computer then, is not one thing, but a way of signifying a place where many actors can meet in a given exchange. Haraway's work on the cyborg represents a coming together of all that has been separated in a binary understanding of Western cultures. Haraway (1991) focuses on the social production of objects through a 'situated knowledge' where the there is a dualistic understanding of everyday life (e.g. local/global, public/private, individual/society). For Haraway, discussions of the material semiotic are rarely located in any one object and avoid technologically determined explanations of meaning.

In the previous chapter the CMC tradition projected a different view of that way people interact with a computer. In Haraway's work the rise of new communication technologies produced an opportunity to explore the way the users are shaped by their experience of technology. The CMC approach implies that communication through a computer takes on an almost disembodied form. Clark (1997), writing from a CMC perspective, states that 'in the virtual environment, we can exist in either a disembodied or a cyberspatial form' (1997: 86). This connects with other theories that recognised online situations as an opportunity to reinvent oneself (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). This research identified the way that online relationships no longer required body (Stratton, 1997).

Alternatively, Haraway treats the 'cyborg' body as one that combines humans and machines. Haraway (1995: 291) argues that 'we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism'. This work emphasises the changing boundaries of the body and the machine and shows how we (as cyborgs) are always embodied. Furthermore, the way we are embodied in this new technological environment replicated some of the problems with the offline world. The first publication of the Cyborg Manifesto in the mid-1980s had a profound effect on

feminism and cyberculture more broadly. The embodied cyborg was a way of recasting the relationship with technology and making a bold statement about offline social and political inequalities. Haraway shows how people accepted their cyborg bodies of race, class gender and sexuality. Tirado (1999) argues, following Haraway, that the cyborg forces us to look at the fragmented self and recognise the forces that impinge on our everyday lives.

Haraway's depiction of the 'cyborg' is one that is loaded with issues of gender, power and sexuality. As previously stated, *The Cyborg Manifesto* appeared at a point of massive social and political change. To some extent, the cyborg has become a metaphor for many of the problems that are associated with contemporary culture. Tirado (1999) explains that the extent of the cyborg-metaphor limits the analysis of the cyborg in everyday life. This extends to use of the term embodied as, particularly in the area of Internet studies, the saturation of term has lost an essence of the actual embodied experience (this is also the case in other parts of psychology, see Cromby, 2005).

This connects with wider issue in Internet studies of the view of the Internet as a space for role-playing, disembodied behaviours where people have to 'type themselves into being' (Súnden, 2003). The disembodied use of the Internet is one where users are able to create a desired version of the self in multiple locations on the Internet. However, in taking the new technology as evidence of the reverse, that new online engagements are now *embodied*, this would carry extra interactional meaning from the overuse of the term embodied and would invoke metaphors of social process and discourse.

Alternatively, this thesis uses the term the concept of *mediation* to explore the actual embodied experience of online interaction. This will focus on the everyday use of communication through new technologies. This recognises the online domain as one that mediates a set of cultural practices and blurs the separation between online and offline. This concept is opposed to the notion of embodied or disembodied and treats all discourse as the product of embodied human being who language to convey meaning. To apply an accurate definition of mediation this chapter will first consider the notion of mediation from the work of cultural psychology.

4.3 Cultural Psychology

In the work of Lev Vygotsky the social and cultural worlds shape the production of human life. In Vygotsky's explanation of learning and development the social is of the utmost importance. Vygotsky (1978) calls this 'mediation' and argues that people allow for the extension of human capabilities through the appropriation of available 'tools'. At the heart of Vygotsky's theory is the notion of 'mediational means'. This is the route by which the cultural tools intervene between culture and the person. It is through the inclusion of cultural tools our world is fundamentally transformed. Vygotsky argues that the 'mediational means' are not considered as something that would otherwise occur. For example, the computer gives us a form of communication that represents a specific form of mediation.

Mediational means (which are not limited to objects like computers or mobile phones and extend right the way through to language, sight, sign systems etc.) are considered, for Vygotsky (1981), to be products of a socio-cultural evolution that are 'appropriated' by groups and individuals. Therefore, as we are included in new social acts, our mental functioning changes through the appropriation of the new form of communication. A large amount of Vygotsky's work is dependent on the notion of sign systems and in many cases he is interested in one sign system in particular - language.

The individual tools (such as language) are amplified by a cultural mediational means in much in the same way a physical tool would amplify a biological individual (e.g. a person using a hammer). Whether the mediational means are material, cultural or psychological, many authors have been keen to show that the use of such mediation will amplify or transform the way people feel about their world (Bruner, 1996). This requires a collective appropriation of tools in a particular moment. Wertsch (1998:23) argues that there is a 'moment of action rather than a separate process or entity that exists in isolation' (1998: 23). Wertsch continues Vygotsky's notion of mediational means are argues all mediational means are brought to bear in the moment of action. Famously, for the cultural psychologists, thought and language combine in action. The computer (or SNSs more specifically) could be seen to represent a new form of *electronic* mediational means. This will require looking at the way the computer in used in action.

Different forms of communication have a different level of appropriation. The meaning that is produced through conversations via the telephone may be different to that of the computer due to the specific ways that the mediated communication is appropriated. The mediational means will affect the psychological and social view of the world. Kiesler (1997) notices how technologies are 'transformative' and result in people thinking differently about their world. The overarching sentiment of mediation is explained by Wertsch (1998: 25):

> Almost all human action is mediated action. Given this, one would expect that it is very difficult to provide an exhaustive list of actions forms and mediational means, and this is indeed the case. The aim is not to provide rigid definition or systems of categorization … any attempt to do so would be either so abstract or so expansive to have little meaning.

As can be seen in the above quote Wertsch argues that 'human action is mediated action'. Thus, the use of the term mediation is not an attempt to list or 'categorise' action in a certain way but to explain the way that all communication lends on the process of mediation. Specific inquiry into the mediational means is only useful if it is located in understanding a form of mediated action (see Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). Therefore, there is an ongoing attempt to try and recognise how the user is mediation a particular form of communication and how these mediational means reflect back on the person. This shows that there is a need to define the specific use of the computer as one that has a explicit meaning in action and how using this form of communication is appropriated amongst all members.

Wertsch (1998) indicates the social implications of mediational means in a close examination of Vygotsky's (1978) 'intermental' and intramental'. For Vygotsky, intermental describes the analysis at a social interactional level and intramental contrasts with an individual sense of mediated action. Essential in this understanding is recognising that both intermental and intramental mediational means are situated in a historical, cultural and institutional context of human action. Wertsch argues that the intermental and the intramental are two connected planes of mediated action. Vygotsky (1981: 164) states that '[higher mental functions] composition, genetic structure, and means of action – in a word, their whole nature – is social'.

For the cultural psychologists, social processes do not become mapped onto the brain in a way that might be considered in other forms of psychology. This is because there is a close association between the intermental and intramental structures that are played-out in both domains of the psychological and the social. When Vygotsky speaks of a 'mental functioning' or 'psychological processes', it is with a view that they are located in a sociocultural heritage. Mind and action join together in a purposeful form of action. This argues that the relationship between the individual and the social is one of a dialectical nature (see Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 1993). In the work of the cultural psychologists there is an understanding of the way that the individual and the social have a permeable formation. This shows that the social and the psychological are brought together in the moment of action and depend on the specific nature of the mediation.

4.4 MySpace and Mediation

MySpace contains a variety of mediational means due to the different communication possibilities (wall posting compared to blogging, for example). From a cultural perspective, it is through an engagement with these mediational means that action becomes psychologically significant. It is the *relative degree* of mediation that is of particular importance. New forms of communication bring a set of technological mediations that requires the appropriation of a distinct set of tools. In MySpace this might be represented by the maintenance of a profile page or the act of adding other users as friends. Every action has a unique sense of shared experience that is communicated in the specific form of mediation. In a key illustration of the notion of mediation Middleton and Brown (2005) analyse the subject of remembering and forgetting through a range of conversational practices. In the following example Middleton and Brown review an earlier piece of research by Buchanan and Middleton (1995):

Extract 1. Buchanan & Middleton (1995)

> Vera: my mother used to wear erm (.) sack apron (.) cos years ago they used to make
>
> the aprons out of a (.) sack bag hadn't they?
>
> Doris: [ooh that's right

Enid: [you could buy [the sack bag (…)

Vera: [can you remember (.) I can remember

        [my mother (.) and she used to-

Jean: [yes (.) yes (.) used to make aprons out the sack bag or a black one (.) and you'd

        Go and change after dinner and she'd put (.) you know (.) an new pinafore and a

        Clean dress or something like that

Enid: We used to buy ours from the Beehive

Vera: ye:s (.) I can see my mother (.) she used (…) sack bag y'know (.)

        [of her back and her front-

Jean: [yeah (.) that's wash day

(cited in Middleton & Brown, 2005: 146)

In Extract 1 the significance of the 'sack bag' provides a way for the speakers to access a variety of memories. Middleton and Brown (2005) notice how the sack bag is part of a network of other such objects (i.e. clean dresses, fine garments, pinafores) that are 'historically grounded' and therefore located in a cultural context. In Extract 1 Vera states how she could 'see' her mother wearing the sack apron on wash day. The sack apron becomes a mediating means for accessing and amplifying past relationships (i.e. Vera speaking highly of her mother). Middleton and Brown reference Michel Serres' notion of 'translation' (1982) to describe the way that this shifting form of mediation comes to represent much more than the object itself. This shows how the different objects are mediated to perform a desired action. The use of the mediation in this way is culturally defined and appropriate through the collective use. Even the most simplistic of objects has the possibility to be ripe with deep experience-laden invocations. In Extract 1, the ladies are able to formulate a joint construction around the image of their mothers on wash day. Each member has a similar experience that reaffirms positive feelings of family relationships through this cultural appreciation of the sack bag.

For Middleton and Brown (2005) the objects form a way of bringing the past into the present. The past is not direct imported into the present as the memory always undergoes a transformation to perform some form of action in the present. The past is recreated anew in order to perform an action through the use of the memory. As can be seen with Vera and her friends, the mediation serves as a good opportunity to comment on their current community status in a way that is linked to certain activities (the coming together to do washing is a past reference to community practice). It also speaks to modern relationships of parenting, technology, culture, heritage and families. All of this information is enacted in that one small extract of communication, and what this data shows, is that mediation can allow the communication of a shared sense of community practice.

All forms of activity are mediated (at a base level through language) and form an experience that is located in the practices of that mediation. There is no direct relationship with the world as all of our relations and experiences are passed through some form of mediation. The success of the mediator is reliant on the ability to feel as if it no longer exists. In the earlier example, the sack apron itself became a tool for doing much more with the communication where a multitude of experiences collided in the collective remembering of the object. This mediation was jointly managed and organised through the negotiation of the memory through the object of the sack apron.

Technology provides another form of mediation. Even though the route for communication is more obvious in new technologies (particularly in new SNSs like MySpace) it is still important to recognise how people actually use new communicative spaces in terms of mediation. What is it that is being mediated in the use of personal profiles in MySpace? The answer to this question is fundamentally about *community*. MySpace allows a feeling of community to be mediated through the shared practices on the site. The competence of such practices is central to our ability to be a member of MySpace and a subsequent feeling of connection. Each practice takes on it own form that forms experience through the sense of community. The following section will further define the concept of mediated community.

4.5 Mediated Community

MySpace is a mediated community that forms a shared sense of connection through the different aspects of the site. All communities are in some way mediated and MySpace represents a new way of connecting with a network of members. It is an electronic community that involves a range of culturally specific practices for mediating a shared experience. The term *mediated community* is chosen to define MySpace as opposed to that of virtual community or just online community – not because these definitions are not all applicable in their own right – but because the term mediated community accurately describes the specific practice of mediating a community in MySpace. In using the term mediated community the intention is to avoid other terminologies that have encountered problems in terms of their definition. For example, consider the comments that Wittel (2001: 62-63) writes on his dissatisfaction with the term 'virtual community':

> [T]he term 'virtual' is misleading in that it suggests a doubling of reality. This demarcation line between a so-called virtual world and a real word has strongly shaped the debate on cyberspace and interactive media in the last few years…In contrast to this view I want to argue for a perspective that does not separate the virtual or online world from the real or offline world. In theoretical terms this emphasis on virtuality is problematic, because it suggests the existence of a real reality, a reality that is not mediated.

Wittel explains how the notion of virtual community implies a connection that is somehow different to other forms of community. As Wittel explains, there is no 'reality that is not mediated'. All aspects of life are then in some way mediated and simple distinctions of online and offline do not capture the complex practices associated of this mediation. The mediated community in MySpace provides a connection between each of the members in a network. This practice automatically counters the problem that many of these users do not have a shared physical space (e.g. they are not friend's offline). In such a community the users mediate a shared virtual space. Hjarvard (2006) writes:

> Mediation refers to the communication through one or more media through which the message and the relation between sender and receiver are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved. (Hjarvard, 2006: 5, cited in Livingstone, 2008: 396)

Hjarvard shows that the 'message and the relation' are shaped by the role of the mediator. In a mediated community the shared message of communion are shaped by the role of the mediator. Hjarvard also implies that communication reflects back into how we understand ourselves in space. Mediated community, as a concept, is harnessed from the definition of mediation in cultural psychology and aims to show how a sense of community is shared by all MySpace users. Mediated community is the online connection that *feels* like a community. The notion of feeling has been rarely attributed to the discussions of virtual communities and is growing in importance across psychology as a whole (see Cromby, 2007). Rheingold (1993: 365) explains the notion of feeling in online exchanges as the following:

> Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

Rheingold explains how the feeling is how people recognise they are part of an online community. It is only when we feel like we are in a community can we give it such a title. This is different to the traditional way of recognising an online community through the sheer number of people who are connected to the network. Although Rheingold was working with the term virtual community, there are some useful aspects to his definition that can inform the concept of mediated community. In the above quote, Rheingold notices how 'social aggregations' (or communities) emerge from the Internet when people input 'sufficient human feeling' must be continued 'long enough' to constitute a feeling of community. This shows that it is not only a feeling that is of importance, but that this feeling has a sense of continuity where the community will persist to remain the same. In addition to this Wellman and Gulia (1999: 331) continue that:

There is so little community life in most neighbourhoods in western cities that it is more useful to think of each individual as having a *personal community*: an individual's social network of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties.

This quote shows how, like with the earlier discussion of cyberspace, the Internet can be seen as a place to regain a notion of community. For Wellman and Gulia, online communities have a high amount of subjective differences that they are defined as small networks of community. It is actually, as Wellman and Gulia write, better to think of each individual as having a 'personal community', one that can be maintained through a set number of connections. The strength of each of these communities is gauged on the personal feeling that the person takes from the community. The resulting amount of overlapping personal communities means that there will be a great number of 'weaker ties' that do not carry the same sentiment. Wellman and Gulia (1999) argue that if one treats all communities as essentially personal communities then it becomes possible to see how the specific features of online community facilitate or impair personal ties. This would give the opportunity to compare online and offline as different ways of mediating personal networks.

However, despite the relative subtlety of this definition, in contrast to Rheingold, a notion of a personal community remains an objectivist approach that treats collectivity as something that can be directly enumerated by counting up the sum of relations and their relative strength. It leaves untouched the idea that community is something which is *felt* or *experienced*. If online interaction can properly be referred to as a community then we need to explicate what Benedict Anderson (1983) refers to as the 'imagined community'. The sense of belonging that members feel, even in the absence of regular contact with large groups of fellow members, is described by Anderson as the imagined aspects of the community:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of the fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson, 1983:6)

Imagined community is the sense of connection that members feel even though many of the members may never have met. Imagined community is not considered to be 'in the minds' of the individuals but in the social practices of the community. This does not imply that there is no psychological element to the imagined community, rather that the psychological and the social are constituted at the point of interaction. The imagined community is the way that users experience a shared space with their friends in MySpace. Anderson (1983: 15) states that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined'. Again, this does not mean that communities that are imagined are not 'real', moreover that this sense of realness is held within the social connection of the community. This connection is then played out in a range of activities and practices. Baym (1997) continues Anderson's findings to show four ways in which the imagined community emerges through social practices including: forms of expression (talking about our communities), identity (our sense of shared community identity), relationship (connections with others) and norms (the rules and conventions that allow us to live together). This shows that through the imagined sense of community there is a felt experience of what it means to be a member of that group.

Mediated communities in MySpace and other SNSs function through the imagined sense of other community members. Mediated community contains an imagined function through the felt presence of these other members. This has clear links to other notions of a 'psychological sense of community' (Glynn, 1981; Sarason, 1974) and the work by Bakardjieva (2003) who uses this term to define online communities in a state of 'virtual togetherness'. Each of these approaches emphasises a sense of interconnectedness as emerging from a perceived amount of social ties and a shared emotional content. Therefore, the notion of mediated community involves an imagined element in the way the group members can relate to shared level of connection.

However, this does not mean that the community has any control over the members, or, that the community exists beyond being 'just there'. This is due to the way that users have to act *into* the community in order to create meaning. In this sense, the community is 'just there' because we can never know or interact with all of those with whom we share a community. The presence of the community is invoked through the different social practices. This is particularly the case for MySpace communities as many users have a large number of friends and regular contact with

each of these friends would be impossible. It also means that the community cannot be seen to have any form of intentionality.

The mediation of MySpace is fundamentally a social process that involves a collective notion of experience. Here, experience is matched against the perceived experiences of others. From this perspective, a member of a community is one of a selection of people who are subject to a similar set of imaginary relations or 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). Middleton and Brown (2005) argue that there needs to be the recognition of the way cultural tools speak to a complex form of mediation even if the exchange may seem simplistic and unproblematic on the surface. Language is obviously central to the way that a user mediates an imagined community but there is also the use of the language and other practices as a more symbolic form of mediation. There is a level of *immaterial* form of mediation that is managed by the use of MySpace.

This unites with distinct forms of constructionism that argue that language might not always be the sole form of action. For example, the distinction of *feeling* that has risen as an imagined sense of community would certainly recognise other forms of action that guide interaction. This will require a discussion of the possibility that there is something beyond the use of language alone. This will aim to further consider experience and subjectivity as of particular importance in the study of mediated communities.

4.6 Representation

One question that is continually raised in constructionist debates is whether there is anything beneath language? Is there anything beneath the construction of a mediated community? The reality/representation debate dates back to the early work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) where the collective group activity of forming something of a mental representation would translate into the mind of each of the individuals in a given group. Burger and Luckmann continued that these representations formed habitual behaviours that reciprocated the roles played by the actors in relation to each other. This could explain the concept of a mediated community as forming a representation in the mind of the other users. The notion of representation is one that has circulated in the field of constructionist research and still remains a central aspect of debate.

Gergen and Gergen (2002) promote a hard-line relativism where the role of language is the primary method for people to understand themselves. They argue that mediation in any linguistic form is just another form of mediation. The relativist position holds that all manner of experience is only accessible as a representation. This idea is fully cemented in the widely cited article 'Death and Furniture' (Edwards et al., 1995) that provides discussion of extreme aspects of individual behaviour as social constructions of communication with no 'truthful' explanation in the world. The consequence of following a relativist position for the study of MySpace would follow that there is no reality that is outside of what one MySpace user can know from their discourse. However, there are some problems when focusing on the use of language alone, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 91) comment:

> As long as linguistics confines itself to constants, whether syntactical, morphological, or phonological, it ties the statement to a signifier and enunciation to a subject and accordingly botches the assemblage; it consigns circumstances to the exterior, closes language in on itself, and makes pragmatics a residue.

Deleuze and Guattari explain how the focus on language 'botches the assemblage' in the explanation the constructed sense of relations. Deleuze and Guattari show how subjectivity (although they might not it call it that) is undercut by the tendency to focus solely on language. The problem being that it becomes impossible to understand communication as anything that does not appear within the boundaries of language. The issue of representing and underlying reality is summarised by Brown and Stenner (2009: 68):

> The core foundational weakness which supports an avoidance of all of these problems is the assumption that, ultimately, discourse is both the source of meaning and the site at which meaning is at stake. In doing so, it has direct implications for how the psychic is conceived in relation to the social, and hence how psychology is conceived in relation to sociology…it encourages the tendency to reduce the psychic to the discourse.

Brown and Stenner show how the psychological can not only be captured by the study of language. Alternatively, as Brown and Stenner argue, we need a way of understanding communication that does not reduce the 'psychic to the discourse'. This is because of the way language is reasonably ill-equipped to deal with all the components of meaning. To resign the analysis of MySpace to the boundaries of language would almost certainly reduce the power of communication, most specifically, the sense of feeling that connects a mediated community. The use of Nigel Thrift's work will try to show an alternative way of conceptualising representation for the purpose of studying mediated communities.

4.7 Non-Representational Theory

Non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008) pushes the sense of movement and performance into central motifs of experience. This 'theory' focuses on the performance of everyday life and establishes the focus of experience from other areas of cultural geography (see Bonta, 2005; Saldanha, 2005). Thrift has a rejection of the static and reductionist explanations of subjectivity that cannot be understood through simple dualisms (Thrift, 1983). The underlying premise is that these dualisms cannot exist without human subjectivity. The intention is to cut through the debate between representation and reality and begin at the complexity of everyday life. As with Thrift, Latour is similarly renowned for stating that the role of a social scientist requires being both a realist and a relativist at the same time.

Non-representational theory conceptualises interaction as a series of overlapping affects in which people and objects cannot be separated. For Thrift, space has the ability to hold together different affects in a way that produces a constant motion of unbounded relations. All of these different affects are held together in the process of communication. Thrift (2006) highlights the chaotic nature of the way these affects are held together in space. The use of the non-representational approach is useful in understanding the impact of 'extra-discursive' elements of communication through an approach that does not treat language as a representation or structure but as a form of communication and connectedness. The feeling in the mediated community is one that relates to issues of connection as opposed to representation or structure.

A central idea to this position is that the world does not come to us through representation and structure. Rather, it is in the ways that we generate difference, diversity and creation, which forms the foundations of our everyday interactions. A non-representational approach requires 'an emphasis on the unremitting materiality of the world where there are no pre-existing objects' (Thrift, 2006: 139). A many points Thrift draws on the work of Deleuze to explain this notion of non-representation. In one particularly good example Deleuze writes:

> In order to be actualised, the virtual cannot proceed by elimination or limitation, but must create its own lines of actualisation in positive acts. The reason for this is simple: while the real is in the image and likeliness of the possible that it realizes, the actual on the other hand, does not resemble the vitality it embodies. It is difference that is primary in the process of actualisation – the difference between the virtual from which we began and the actuals at which we arrive. (Deleuze, 1991: 97, cited in Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000: 416)

Deleuze explains how the virtual must create its own 'lines of actualisation in positive acts'. This shows that the performance will always change the outcome of what might happen. In MySpace every action has the potential to be seen by a large number of imagined connections. These actions impact of the way people create 'line of actualisation' in MySpace. Every group or community has particular ways of viewing reality that intersect with classic notions of space and time (see Thrift, 2006). From this perspective, the group is dedicated to transforming ideas of a group by relinquishing subjectivity and action as rooted in representational thought. Mediated communities can be thought of in more performative terms by thinking of the space in terms of actualisation.

Non-representational theory is concerned with the performance of spaces and the routines and practices that allow people to reproduce them. The intention of this style of research is to move away from an understanding language in terms of structure/agency and consider the layered interactions that are constantly being negotiated in interaction. This approach is trying to grasp a sense of action where there are no pre-conceived categories of behaviour, but rather where there is the potential to act which is contained within different social spaces. Thrift (2008) refers

to this as the 'readiness potential'. The potential to act is distributed across a range of spaces which come together in the moment of performance.

Non-representational theory is about the way signs and things become produced in space (Gill, 1998). Communication is always present but only becomes visible through the different forms of mediation. Thrift conceptualises 'artificial components' that make up the background to new spaces. This background is rarely questioned and is 'the surface on which life floats' (Thrift, 2008: 91). MySpace forms a background for the events that are continually impacting the kind of relations that can occur in that space. These events are shaped as they happen and mediate the experience of all the users. Thrift (2008: 112) states:

> It follows that this style of work is both anti-cognitivist and, by extension, anti-elitist since it is trying to counter the still-prevalent tendency to consider life from the point of view of individual agents who generate action by instead weaving poetic of the common practices and skills produce people, selves and worlds.

Thrift shows how, like in the work of Harré, there is a need to avoid concentrating on the role of the 'actor' (as in the critique of the dramaturgical self) and focus on the way that people jointly produce 'selves and worlds'. The non-representational approach looks for the ways that people act into the world amidst an ongoing set of continually changing circumstances. It involves looking for a different kind of topology that is concerned with the connectedness and communication as opposed to structure and agency.

From a non-representational approach, experience of MySpace does not come in the form of a representation but as a set of cultural practices that have to be made sense of in action. For a majority of the work in psychology there is a distinctly modernist undertone in the way that truth or reality can be gained through accurate forms of knowledge. Non-representational theory, like many other post-modern approaches, is dedicated to presenting a kind of psychology that is not detached from culture and society. The non-representational approach does not aim to reveal universal truths about the nature of human interaction but recognises how the notion of truth is contextually constructed and located in a particular culture.

Thrift's work shows how the realism/relativism debate is not always helpful as it perpetuates the discussion of structure and agency. Alternatively, for Thrift, language is one way that our subjectivity is constructed in action but there is also the need to consider the relationship with the unfolding materiality of other, what one might call, 'extra-discursive' elements of interaction (see Brown 2001; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). This aligns with the definition of mediated community where there is a feeling of connection that sustained by each of the members. It is through the mediated use of this space that the users experience MySpace.

4.8 Mediated Community: Experience and Subjectivity

Nigel Thrift's work is helpful in the discussion of the realist/representation debate but it also has a more poignant impact on highlighting the focus of experience and subjectivity. Issues of this kind are growing in critical forms of psychology where the formation of a non-reductionist, anti-humanist perspective challenges dominant forms of essentialist psychology. However, the notion of subjectivity features very little in the work of social constructionism (Burr, 2003). In fact, subjectivity could be said to have stronger ties with other forms of critical psychology, for example, in the area of critical health psychology (see Smail, 2005).

An important movement in the area of subjectivity is in the work around reforming the subject which has led to the new and promising journal *Subjectivity* (formerly the *Internal Journal of Critical Psychology*). This journal emphasises the way subjectivity is socially, politically and culturally located. This journal has a particular interest in the ability to escape the forces of neo-liberal power and create new 'subjectivities'. The work in this area is closely associated with Lisa Blackman, John Cromby, Derek Hook, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Valerie Walkerdine. The new area of subjectivity makes strong use of a Foucauldian form of subjectivity, which is a direct move away from Althusserian structuralism, and signals a focus on the practices of power/knowledge and our personal thoughts, feelings and desires. By way of introducing this field a brief introduction to other issues in this new area of subjectivity will now be discussed.

Foucault's (1984) work subjectivity relates to the duel experience of being subjected through power relations and our own sense of self-knowledge that delivers and alternative source of subjectivity. Foucault conceptualises subjectivity in both of these forms, however, subjects are never seen to have the ability to change the power relations that create and control the subject. Particularly in Foucault's earlier work, subjectivity is understood in terms of an *a priori* as subjects only have access to a specific set of discourses that occur in relations to available body of power/knowledge.

Judith Butler's (2005) *Making Sense of Oneself* continues Foucault's argument to explain how subjectivity can be considered as both the subject and the agent of power. For Butler, it is in the reflective turn that subjects are able to look at themselves to achieve a different level of subjectivity. Through reflection of the normative, social categories from which the subject is created, a position of power is granted that extends the subjects ability to see beyond the current social position. This gives the subject the ability to incorporate aspects of the power from which they were created and leads to a positive future conception of subjectivity. Butler argues that this reflection leads to the ability to go beyond the current conditions of power.

This form of subjectivity uses Foucault's ideas to conceptualising the importance of experience (see also Rose, 1998). Here, experience of being a subject constitutes subjectivity as more important than the underlying structures of power and knowledge (in a direct attempt to stay away from structuralist accounts of subjectivity). This provides the opportunity to further some of Foucault's later ideas (and others, most notably that of psychoanalysis) to gain purchase on the way that subjectivity was more than a secondary effect. The new focus on subjectivity recognises the importance of experience and focuses on the primacy of subjectivity.

It is through experience that we receive our subjectivity. Subjectivity is not just about the capacity of the subject: It is about the experience of a culture that is grounded in an ever-changing set of specific practices. It is through the collective appreciation of everyday phenomena that our subjectivity is performed. Work in this area explores subjectivity at a social level and differs significantly from traditional approaches in psychology. From this perspective, subjectivity is a continuously unfolding set of relations that become visible at a social level. It constantly allows new subjectivities to forms through the continually changing shape of social relations (research in subjectivity is also primarily interested in 'the body').

New areas of subjectivity have an emphasis on evolving 'material-discursive' arguments (see Yardley, 1993). This retains the importance of language but explores other objects and things that impact on the way one experiences the world (see Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). Furthermore, subjectivity is not seen as something that a person possesses (Rose, 1998) nor is it something that can be ascertained by looking 'inwards' (e.g. through psychoanalytic traditions). This focuses on the way new subjectivities are *created* through the unfolding relations of power and materiality (see Blackman et al., 2008). In this context, the primary focus is on the way subjectivities materialise through the cultural and social relations in new technologies.

However, the term subjectivity should not be confused with the earlier definition of the self. Subjectivity is a broader concept that encompasses cultural and historical discourses of power, knowledge and control. Alternatively, the self is the specific performance of social interaction that explains the way we fashion ourselves in everyday forms of interaction. It is here where the role-playing aspects of the self give an insight into the way people perform in social encounters (a notion that was earlier developed through a constructionist approach to this idea). This notion of the self has a long history in social psychology (as opposed to social theory) where there is an established practice of presenting oneself to others. The difference between self and subjectivity is one of crucial importance and as Burkitt (2008: 244) argues 'the term (subjectivity) is synonymous with the subjugation of the self, both to others and to its own conscious reflection and conscience, and this needs to be set against that other term more common in social psychology – that of "self"'. This quote shows that the self is the general practice of presenting oneself in our everyday interactions whereas the wider concept of subjectivity that includes issues of 'subjugation'.

4.9 Chapter Summary

This thesis is aims to explore the experience of using MySpace. This includes a study of how the self, identity and community are performed in different communication practices across the site. In addressing this issue attention is situated on the performative forms of the self as opposed personal or sociological formations. From this perspective, the production and organisation of social relations is of the utmost importance. This will require an in-depth analysis of the use of different aspects of the

MySpace page (the blog, the wall etc.) to construct the self and identity. The aim of this chapter was to tackle the third player in this game – community.

MySpace is defined as mediated community where users directly mediate their experience through the site and are connected to a felt presence of the other community members. The term mediated community represents a way of conceptualising the use of a computer in forms of the actual embodied experience (thus avoiding the embodied/disembodied argument). The mediated community is subtly different to other forms of 'virtual' communities where it is typically assumed that 'real world' is separable form the online exchanges. The community mediates the collective presence of the other members through MySpace network. It is this feeling that defines MySpace as a community.

MySpace, like any other community, includes a specific form of mediation that impacts on experience. MySpace users act into MySpace to create their own forms of 'actualisation' (following the work of Nigel Thrift and his non-representational approach). The mediated community is one that is 'just there' in the way that the community itself has no direct form of intentionality – it can never be more than 'just there' as it is a collective group of people that are sometime not even aware of the connection. The important point here is that the community is imagined. This imagined sense of community delivers a certain feeling of connection that is managed through the relations in MySpace (it is not 'in the mind'). It is with this sense of connection that users act in MySpace. This supports the on-going focus on movement and performance that demonstrates an understanding of language as 'a small cog in an extra-textual practice' (Deleuze, 1998: xvi). It is here where performance, multiplicity and process are opening the investigation of MySpace to new theoretical horizons.

Chapter 5:

Methodology

5.1 Design

This thesis designed a method for analysing MySpace that gathered a sequence of empirical observations from public personal profiles. These observations systematically recorded all aspects of MySpace use (e.g. a profile change, the addition of a new blog or communication on the wall). The method recorded natural data from the profile pages in order to be analysed at a later date. This involved gathering communication from the wall area of the profile and used the hyperlink feature of the profile page in order to access the other half of the communication. For this reason the method is described as the relational hyperlink methodology. The relational hyperlink methodology (RHM) was able to gather data that could build an interactional picture of MySpace use. The RHM was designed to capture movement and performance by tracing the activities of a set amount of MySpace users.

The use of the hyperlink allowed the reconstruction of recent periods of activity. The 'relational' aspect of the methodology accentuates the way the hyperlinks represent the foundation of communication (as opposed to just a physical property of the computer system). In gathering the data, a comment that had been placed on the wall could be re-enacted using the hyperlink to access the other half of the communication. This methodology uses the actual functions of MySpace as a tool for gathering data. It is not an entirely natural procedure as the information was not recorded in real-time, however, the RHM allowed for the reconstruction of an interaction directly after the event. The RHM also recorded biographical data and other frequencies as part of the data gathering process, this included: the number of blogs a user places on their profile, the number of profile changes and the number of friends that is recorded on the profile.

All of the observations were documented by taking a screenshot of the entire profile page. In using the screenshot, everything on the page to be captured and saved in a file on the computer. The screenshot was exported into a simplistic software

package where it was tagged and logged on the computer. The RHM also saved a separate file of the text from the wall conversations in order to add another level of storage (in case the original became lost) and to aid the analysis of the textual aspects of the communication. All of the files will be permanently deleted on the completion of the thesis. The RHM required checking the participant's profiles on a daily basis and recording any activity. A screenshot was taken on each visit to the profile even if there appeared to be no obvious changes to the page (this was limited to a certain time period to be outlined in the following section dedicated to sampling issues). The intention was to see if any changes had occurred on the page and if any new communication had taken place. The collective group of screenshots showed the changes and communicative practices that had occurred on each users profile page during the period of the study. Therefore, the later analysis required linking the conversations together using the time signatures that were assigned to each new wall post. For other forms of activity (such as profile changes) a difference was recorded through the varying time points in the study.

If one of the participants had a new post on their page the hyperlink was retraced to collect evidence of the communication. Each aspect of the communication was documented and saved to a file. This was also opportunity to see if the data on the other profile was public (for ethical reasons) and only those public profiles would be included in the study. The method being described here could then be used in the study of other SNSs, such as, Facebook, Bebo, Lunarstorm or LinkedIn. The RHM was designed to study any of the new SNS (even though there are subtle differences for each of them) as each site is organised around a central profile page that is managed with the use of hyperlinks.

The observations of MySpace produced a detailed description of the activity which could then be analysed for dynamics processes, themes and meanings. However, this is not to overlook the findings are gathered from a more quantitative approach. For this reason, screenshot were also taken of the biographical information that people saved to their profiles. This allows a statistical analysis of the MySpace data to be combined with the data from the RHM. The statistical data was deemed necessary to provide a basic set of descriptive statistics of the MySpace cohort. The RHM provided a high level of information on all aspects of MySpace activity and highlights a specific method for gathering data from SNSs.

5.2 Sample

This thesis reports empirical data gathered from a collection of MySpace profiles. The data comprised of information from 100 individual MySpace users. The study avoided profiles that were maintained by music or other artistic groups as these were typically maintained by more than one user. The study tracked the 100 profiles over a period of one month. This period of time was chosen to order to draw enough information from the MySpace profiles while not overloading the capabilities of the researcher. The data was gathered in two sections. The first group of fifty profiles were gathered from 26th March 2007 to 26th April 2007. The second group were gathered from 5th August 2007 to 5th September 2007. The reason for splitting the data gathering was due to the inability to check all 100 profiles in a day.

The period of one month was also chosen in order to guarantee a sequence of communicative action. Where the data to be gathered over a longer period, for example one year, the profiles may have only been checked weekly and consequently may have not provided the desired amount of interaction for this study. In an intense period of one month the study was able to capture numerous strings of interaction and keep a close contact with the data. As many of the users have conversations in a synchronous manner (where they have conversations through the wall in a chat-like style) the amount of information that would need documenting on visiting the profiles after a longer period of time would be difficult to process.

The sample was gathered using the 'browse' function from the MySpace site (an individual search function that is common to all SNSs) and displays the total number of people on the site. The search initially found over 3,000 people and this study took the first 100 hundred people from a random search as the participants. The MySpace browse function uses a complex algorithm to align search criteria based on the MySpace userID. The userID is a number that is randomly assigned to the profile page during the sign-up process (for more information see Thelwall, 2008b). The algorithm that MySpace uses is difficult to document but one would expect that it is designed in such a way to promote those users who visit their profiles regularly.

All of the search criteria was aligned to the default settings except 'location' and '[what are you] here for', these were appropriately set to 'UK' and 'networking' (see Figure 4). This was intended to highlight people from the UK who were known to use the MySpace profiles frequently. It was inappropriate to include other countries in this

study. This sampling method could be classified as a random form of sampling as the search engine returned a sample of people from the total number of MySpace users. However, due to the unknown nature of the algorithm, this study is better described as an opportunity sample due to the selection of the one hundred profiles which was taken from the first page of the browse function. The study was limited to users over eighteen years of age, even though, all profiles below eighteen should be set to 'private' and would have been excluded from the search for that reason.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the search criteria used to gather the sample from MySpace.

Figure 4 shows how the search criterion was inputted into the MySpace page. As can be seen, the use of drop-down boxes enabled a wide variety of selections (this is how people are able to find others in MySpace) where this study predominantly opted for the default position. In future uses of this method this could be one opportunity to focus on particular aspects of the MySpace demographic. The data had to be gathered shortly after the interaction as there was a possibility that the link might 'break' or be deleted if it became too old. Due to the intensity of some of the interactions there was a need to dedicate a large amount of time to the data gathering process. As the amount

of information and communication was rapidly increasing, it would be become difficult to document the profile activity after a long period of time. Over the course of the month the RHM recorded a large amount of information in the form of communication and other aspects of SNS activity. The importance of the hyperlink to the current study will now be discussed.

The data was gathered by using the hyperlinks of the MySpace page. A MySpace user understands that in posting even a seemingly inconsequential message to the wall of another user would carry with it a hyperlink to their profile. The hyperlink is rarely credited for the part it plays in the success of SNSs more generally. It provides the capability to quickly jump between different profiles, and without it, much of the main functionality would be lost. The hyperlink is hidden in MySpace through the way it is connected to the profile photograph as opposed to a textual description of exactly where the hyperlink will lead. MySpace users are highly practiced at moving round their network through the hyperlinks on the profile. However, the study of MySpace was not intending to document the use of the hyperlink itself (cf. Beaulieu, 2005; Hine, 2000; Scharnhorst, 2003). Instead, the hyperlink represents the way of capturing the communication from the different parties involved. In retracing the hyperlinks, the use of a screenshot could record the communication pattern as a whole. The RHM could be used over any time span but will benefit most from an intense period of study in order to make best use of the hyperlinked connections.

5.3 Analytic Procedure

The analysis, like many other forms of qualitative inquiry, involved a close reading of the data followed by numerous attempts to ground the findings in various pieces of data. Each of the main sections of the profile (the blog, the wall etc.) was analysed in turn. This analysis was guided by the use of three basic principles. The use of these principles was intended to focus the analysis on the central issues of performance, movement and process. The RHM used bespoke assemblage of analytic principles where there are, admittedly, some overlapping features with other forms of constructionist research. This is based on the importance of language and discourse from the constructionist position.

To form a base for this analysis three main principles are used to amplify the MySpace data. These principles would not allow the analysis to stray from the data as the theoretical implication of each principle had to be disciplined by the surface regularities of the data. The three principles are: i) the discursive principle of 'sequencing' ii) the semiotic principle of 'relationality' iii) the gestalt concept of foreground and background. Each of these principles will now be discussed in more detail and will include specific relevance to the analysis of the MySpace data.

5.3.1 The Discursive Sequencing Principle

Conversation analysis is a strand of discursive psychology that focuses on the fine-grained analysis of conversation in action (see Heritage, 2005; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1989). In a recent book, Schegloff (2007) explores the way that conversation is held together through a basic sequence of turn taking. This sequence gives a general shape to conversations that suspends interaction in a coherent manner for those who are present. In an earlier collaboration with Harvey Sacks, Schegloff describes how the majority of sequence organisation is centred on 'talk in-interaction'. Furthermore, the use of 'adjacency pairs' explains the natural way that talk functions in unison (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The adjacency pair also explains how conversation achieves a mutual orientation towards a common goal. From this perspective, adjacency pairs contain a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP). The combination of the FPP and SPP reveals a contingent action in talk.

Schegloff (2007) develops these claims and argues how sequences do not always develop as one would expect (e.g. located in one topic or another). In fact, when the next action does not occur as one would typically expect then this can be overtly noticeable to other members of the conversation (see also Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). Therefore, the use of language, in this way, shows that there is more to what is being said than that which literally appears in the conversation. Similar findings on the nature of *preferred* or *dispreferred* responses show that the SPP typically aligns with the FPP in either a positive or a negative fashion (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks, 1987). The preferred adjacency pair is experienced when the FPP is accepted by the SPP. Furthermore, a dispreferred response is shown to embody the rest of the conversation as the realisation of the rejection of the FPP becomes apparent.

Research in discursive sequencing shows the importance of 'try-marking' (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1996). Try-marking refers to the way a conversation is initiated through experimentation with a range of conversational starters. The notion of try-marking is typically a reaction to the speaker being unsure of a recipient's response. From this perspective, different interactional markers are able to recruit the receiver into a conversation. This supports the overall nature of the inherent sequence to talk and interaction. The use of this principle orientates the data to explore how MySpace users initiate conversation across the site. This is why it is necessary for the data to appear in sequence.

5.3.2 Semiotic Relationality

Semiotic 'relationality' is the second principle to be used in conjunction with the RHM. The study of semiotics is interested in the way that signs carry meaning and significance. Semiotics aims to understand how the structure of signs is connected to cultural systems, artefacts and rituals. At the centre of this theory is the concept of 'relationality', which describes the movement between signs and comprehension. Barthes (1967:47) argues that 'the signifier is purely a *relatum*, who's definition can not be separated form that of the signified'. Although Barthes' work is recently used as a reference to semiotics before postmodernism, there are some underlying principles that remain, for example, that the main object of semiotics is to decode how people draw meaning from social life.

ANT is also tied with semiotics through the concept of 'objects of value' (Greimas, 1988) where all actors are involved with the mediation of meaning and significance. ANT extends the work of AJ Greimas to move from semiotics to materiality (for further discussion see Akrich & Latour, 1992). From this perspective, the network in MySpace would not represent a *thing* that is defined by a set of interconnected points or 'nodes' (as with SNA). Alternatively, it would be described as a circulating entity that is embedded in the ability of each actant to influence the actions of another. In using this perspective, the MySpace users are understood as having the ability to influence another. Semiotic relationality is used as a way of loosening ontological distinctions of representation and reality as it enables the ability to look at the phenomenon of interest without treating certain aspects as foundational or essential.

The use of semiotic relationality is able to recognise all aspects of the MySpace page (words, images, photographs, graphics etc.) as having an impact in the relational construction of experience. The network of relations between objects and people are connected through the MySpace profile. Furthermore, a very simple object on the profile page could have the ability to affect other actants just as a lager object (in this case an entire profile change is a good example). In ANT terms, the use of semiotic relationality is able to erode other forms of order to allow the significance of meaning and materiality to emerge. In the analysis of the MySpace data there is an attempt to leave the foundation aspect of reality/representation and focus on webs of social relations in MySpace (similar to Nigel Thrift's (2008) 'non-representational approach' outlined in Chapter 4).

Semiotic relationality focuses on the movement and performance of the MySpace page in a way that is vital to the constructionist notions of self and identity. The mediated community is, like the concept of the network in ANT, not limited to the physical nature of the connections, but rather the ability to influence and interact with others. The communication is then understood as what MySpace users can *do* as opposed to what the network represents. In line with the discursive sequencing principle, the use of semiotic relationality instils the importance of the relational connections with others. This focuses the data from the RHM on the semiotic value of signs and meaning in interaction.

5.3.3 Gestalt Principle of Foreground and Background

The third principle that guided the analysis is the gestalt notion of foreground and background. In the history of psychology *the visual* has never been of more importance than within the movement of gestalt psychology. In the CMC tradition, the issue of the visual is typically separated as an 'independent variable' that is quantified in particular ways. From the gestalt perspective, the visual is never separated into objects of meaning and non-meaning in our visual field. This perspective explains that people can never pull some aspect of meaning or judgement from everything in our visual field as it always comes to us as a whole. Gestalt psychology tests the boundaries of the visual and has pioneered some of the most famous images to test our conceptions of psychology.

The outcome of a gestalt investigation is notoriously expressed as a set of principles that are intended to define all aspects of the visual. Once visual objects are a member of that set of principles the individual aspects of the object are lost. Köhler (1969) argues that this is how familiar objects have the ability to almost disappear due to the visual inseparability from the field as a whole. This principle resonates with the way one sees a MySpace page. The actions in MySpace are not only be related to the small objects on the page (such as the text) but must be able to visualise the wholeness of the profile page. The analysis of the MySpace data utilises a gestalt-like vantage point that attempts to understand the visual constitution of the profile as a coherent whole. This is not to state that the smaller objects of the MySpace page become lost in the larger impression of the profile - more that - if such a disappearance does occur then it is of interactional relevance to the way that MySpace profiles are constituted.

Gestalt psychology is specifically interested in the issue of foreground and background. In gestalt, foreground and the background are considered to speak to each other in such a way that communicates a consistent meaning of a whole object. This would mean that the foreground and background of the visual are speaking in different ways that communicates something of a visual image. Gestalt psychologists use notions of *detached* or *segregated* wholes as a way of deriving difference in the visual field (stemming from the work of Köhler, 1969). The sense of difference is applied to the entirety of the visual field instead of minute aspects of one field in particular. For gestalt, objects only appear in the visual field if the boundary is perceived and therefore the process which makes visual objects emerge is also responsible for establishing certain separations in the perceptual field. It is in this vein were the notion of 'perceptual organisation' was born (see Biederman, 1987; Blake & Hirsch, 1975). Following gestalt, the objects on a MySpace page appear like the composition of musical harmony, where the page forms a perceptual whole rather than a set of individual tones or objects.

The foreground and background principle encourages the analysis of MySpace to explore the visual wholeness of the page, more specifically, the way that the visual aspects of the foreground and the background communicate a collective form of information. The basic orientation of the MySpace page, as with most other SNSs, produces a separation between the different activities (blogging, wall posting etc.). However, this approach aids the thinking around the way these different practices

form a boundary in the visual field. This assumes that the boxes on the MySpace page form a difference between foreground and background in interaction. How does this foreground and background communicate a consistent whole in MySpace? The answer to this question will emphasise the importance of the visual aspects of the profile page.

Gestalt psychology understands the *relations* that subjects have with their visual field. This asserts that particular relations emerge when our attention is in the right direction (Mendola et al., 1999). This is able to support the principle of semiotic relationality through the way that relations are formed in our ability to influence others. The use of gestalt psychology is able to recognise the relation and dependency through which objects relate. As with ANT, the interest in relations is pivotal to understanding the way that different boundaries emerge. Gestalt psychology opens up the visual field in order to avoid pre-existing themes or concepts. It also seeks to expose the natural complexity of phenomena. The analysis of the RHM data gives the opportunity to consider the relationship between the visual and the textual based on the importance of the visual in the gestalt approach.

5.4 Implementing the Analytic Principles

The main aim of the RHM is to allow the data to demonstrate the natural forms of communication in MySpace. The analytic principles keep the data at the centre of the argument and focus on the surface regularities of the data. This will explore the way communication and other such processes continually fold into one another in order to create meaning. The RHM is combined with the set of psychological principles in order to provide stability to the method. The use of well documented analytic principles (discursive sequencing principle, the gestalt principle of foreground and background etc.) gives strength to the method as a whole. Each of these principles is able to gain purchase on the experience of using MySpace. The use of such a method mobilises a constructionist form of social psychology that recognises the action orientation of language and other practices.

The analytic principles are not implemented in any strict manner during the analysis as they are intended to amplify the data as opposed to fuelling the theory itself. To that end, there is a contradictory nature to the chosen theories to keep the analysis grounded in the data. For example, gestalt psychology gives a holistic impression of the profile page compared to the discursive sequencing principle that

has a more detailed focus of communicational practices. In switching between these two theories neither one is able to take hold of the data. Also, the principles do not always feature directly in the analysis. In fact, the data features an entirely new set of theoretical explanations that are used to explore specific findings in the data. These secondary theories have direct relevance to the data that enables further amplification of particular ideas.

Not only do the theoretical principles vary throughout the analysis but the data itself is treated in different ways; ranging from a small piece of textual data to the large-scale use of the profile page as a whole. This is attempting to explore different ways of studying the data and identify more effective approaches for studying this new phenomenon. Moreover, this is able to bring different analytical points of interest forward at different times. For example, looking at a section of textual data would encourage an analysis of the specific forms of language use (e.g. discourse analysis), conversely, the analysis of the profile page as a whole might focus on a visual level of analysis. This demonstrates the versatility of data and emphasises a topological approach to studying MySpace.

Relations are the subject of interest as opposed to the essential properties of the group. Recent movements in constructionism and the 'mash-up' of other psychological principles are intended to capture something of the experience of MySpace. Therefore, the size and nature of the community is secondary to what the people *do* in it. From this perspective, cultural change is treated as normal and immanent as opposed to surprising and extraordinary. If anything, the analytic principles are united by the way they positioned communication as constantly in some form of transition (from singular to a whole, from one communicative position to another). This emphasises the importance of movement and process.

However, despite the disinterest in essential properties there is still the provision for a statistical analysis of the MySpace data. Statistical analysis provides descriptive statistics that are highly useful in comparison to the main body of qualitative analysis. This will connect the current study with a wealth of findings that have been generated from a CMC approach. The statistics can be introduced at many different points during the qualitative forms of analysis. It is for this reason that it seems inappropriate to describe this approach as a mixed methods approach. For one, it is an inaccurate description of this methodology due to the fundamental qualitative nature of this approach. Secondly, a mixed methods approach typically requires using two different

strategies to answer the same question, for example, one might administer a questionnaire to one set of participants and conduct a second level of data gathering using focus groups. This would give two different sets of data. In this study the statistical and qualitative analyses are applied to the same set of data. This is intended to allow the statistics to complement the qualitative analysis (e.g. the statistic analysis may show that a participant makes a high number of profile changes which would allow for a qualitative analysis to be conducted on that data).

In a continuation of this discussion of what this approach is *not* it is also noteworthy to include that this investigation should not be considered as a non-representational approach or a study using ANT. These approaches have been introduced as a way of promoting a particular form of constructionism. Thrift (2003) even argues that the non-representational approach is not an approach that should be used in the main focus of an empirical investigation. Thrift argues that the non-representational approach should be combined with other theoretical principles (as with this research). It is the area constructionism that underpins the design of the RHM in this investigation. This represents the need to consider the multifaceted relationship between the person and the computer in the construction of social psychological theory. Gordo-López and Parker (1999) demonstrate a range of arguments on the posthuman, subjectivity and other performative ways of viewing the experience of online spaces. It is in a similar vein that the current study of MySpace is hoping to make some progress.

5.5 Chapter Summary

The relational hyperlink methodology (RHM) provides a bespoke method for gathering data from MySpace (and potentially other SNSs). A set of data gathering techniques were employed to record MySpace interactions over a time period of one month. During which time the activities of 100 MySpace users were archived through a series of screenshots that would allow the interaction to be reconstructed in the analysis. This method was designed to allow the performance of MySpace interactions to emerge naturally in the data. The hyperlink formed the basis on which the relations could be established and collected.

Hyperlinks were retraced in order to document the different actions the MySpace engaged in. The range of actions available to MySpace users (e.g. blogging, wall posting, and background changes) supplied a variety of different activities that

were acknowledged with a screenshot. The sampling procedure used the internal MySpace search engine as a way of identifying the participants. This search was limited to intentionally exclude band profiles or vulnerable groups of people (the reason for this will be further discussed in the following chapter on ethics).

A set of analytic principles were applied to the data to identify the performance of the self and identity in MySpace. The analytic principles formed a range of psychological principles that complimented different areas of the interaction. The principles include: the discursive sequencing principle, the principle of semiotic relationality and gestalt principle of foreground and background. Applying these principles to the data required a close reading of the text and identified themes across the data set as a whole. These findings would not then be generalisable in an experimental fashion but they would hope to show the subjective qualities of the experience in MySpace. The analytic principles were intended to guide the analysis in a qualitative direction where a topology of communication and connectedness became the principal analytic concern.

Chapter 6:

The Ethics of Studying MySpace

6.1 Studying MySpace

The relational hyperlink methodology (RHM) offers a bespoke methodology for studying MySpace. It is a way of documenting communication in MySpace through the practice of retracing hyperlinks and recording all activity through the use of a screenshot. In this study, the profiles were gathered from the MySpace site by randomly searching through the internal browse function. The profiles that feature in this study were publicly available at the time and this means that the data gathering process did not require logging onto the MySpace site. The data is gathered from public sites that are no different any other publicly available document (newspapers etc.). Internal messages were also sent to the participants, through the MySpace system directly, and none of the participants chose to be removed from the study. As a secondary precaution, all of the data will be deleted from the computer on completion of this thesis.

6.2 Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance for this project is granted from the Department of Human Sciences, Loughborough University. Approval is also granted from the Loughborough University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This project is in accordance with the Universities ethical procedures and the University guidelines. The approval from both locations was granted before any of the data collection began (March 2007). The MySpace terms and conditions also stress that 'MySpace does not claim any ownership rights in the text, files, images photos, videos, sounds, musical works, works of authorship, applications, or any other materials that you post on MySpace services' (MySpace Terms and Conditions, 2008).

6.3 MySpace Ethics

Many of the traditional issues of research ethics warrant extra discussion in light of the use of MySpace or other online communities. In particular, issues of withdrawal are difficult to assess due to the way many users leave their personal profiles for long periods of time, which could indicate a desire to no longer be a member of the site, and would equally result in removal from any investigation. However, it is difficult to recognise any extended period of time that would clarify a need to be removed from such as study. Therefore, in this case, participants were only to be withdrawn from the study if they changed their profile status to 'private' or if they deleted the profile entirely.

However, this research was able to keep to more standard ethical procedures in the sampling practices where certain vulnerable groups (such as the over 65s and under 18s) could be excluded from the study during the search process. This is the only stipulation that was imposed on the search criteria and the rest of the settings were left in their default position. MySpace privacy statements, terms of use and other more general help features, were all monitored during the research to maintain a high knowledge of the ethical issues surrounding the use of MySpace (and the Internet more generally). The news stories that appeared in the mainstream press were also consulted during the investigation. The findings of this investigation were treated with a high level of social sensitivity and any information that was felt to be potentially damaging was immediately destroyed. The cookies/web page addresses were all deleted from the system once the data had been gathered.

Elgesem (2003) explains how all Internet researchers are to ask themselves three main questions before they begin any investigation: (i) Is the autonomy of research subjects adequately secured? (ii) Is the method adequate? (iii) Is the knowledge produced relevant enough? A brief discussion of these questions, with relevance to MySpace, will show how this methodology thoroughly considers the issue of ethics. Firstly, the autonomy of the subjects is secured by changing any real names and other sensitive personal information. Many of the users adopt pseudonyms or other personal names that helped to conceal their identity. Therefore, the study could be described as a non- intrusive observation which has been popular elsewhere on the Internet (see Bordia, 1996). The method further secures the autonomy of the participants by imposing a sense of distance between the researcher and the participants. In using the

natural occurring data the researcher did not have to have any contact with the participants. By not being connected to the participants, the research could have been stopped at any time and will not have the potential to impact on the participants in a more general sense.

Secondly, in answering the question, is the method then adequate? The aim of this research is looking for how people use MySpace from a constructionist perspective. The method is perfectly suited for answering this question. The method is ethical while still opening a space for exploration and discovery. As will be discussed later, many researchers ignore ethical procedures when studying MySpace due to the public nature of the site. The design of the RHM did not to resort to ignoring ethics but found a way to encounter the data in a way that protects all parties involved (e.g. in refining the search or the decision to contact the participants afterwards). The issue of ethics is recognised as larger than any single human being and is centrally defined by the relations and encounters. Therefore, the design of the methodology considered the interactions in MySpace and designed the research accordingly.

Thirdly, is the knowledge produced relevant enough? MySpace and the other new forms of SNSs represent a predominantly uncharted area of communication. It is for this reason that that the data is essential to see how the people communicate in this new social arena. There is a need to explore expressive forms of data in a way that cannot be obtained through a questionnaire or survey methodologies. The sheer number of people that are logging on to see their MySpace profiles everyday further clarifies the need for research in this area.

In ethics discourse, particularly in psychology, there is an ongoing discussion about how a researcher will observe, measure and control the subject of their investigation. The analysis of MySpace calls for consideration of the way the researcher can control the participants, and instead, develops an argument for a researcher to encounter the data in a way that is acceptable to both parties (of researcher and participant). The following discussion of wider issues should help to contextualise a need for 'good judgement' in the area of Internet ethics and a loosening of institutional procedures.

6.4 Exploring Issues of Internet Research

One reason why it is important to have the above guidelines scrutinised is due to the recent interest from most ethical committees in the area of Internet research. Since the rise of web 2.0 technologies there has been a growing media tension around the safety of the people who regularly gather on MySpace. Headlines such as 'MySpace tackles teen safety fears' (BBC News, 11th April 2006), 'Privacy fears shock Facebook' (Wired News, 6th September 2006) and most recently 'Children flock to social networks' (BBC News, 2nd April 2008) seem to propel a danger that is associated with using MySpace and other SNSs. However, Marwick (2008) describes these debates as 'technopanics' that are fuelled by the media and typically based on a limited knowledge of the technology.

Baroness Greenfield's recent article in the Daily Mail entitled 'Social Websites Harm Children's Brains' (Daily Mail, 24th February 2009) outlines the neurological dangers of using sites like MySpace. Baroness Greenfield states how SNSs can 'rewire' the brain in a way that makes children unable to perform 'normal' social relationships. Unfortunately, most of Greenfield's work is based on anecdotal evidence, and little mention of the context surrounding other technologies (e.g. television, computer games) affect such disorders. Similarly, the implications of a recent government initiation has focused on the safety of young children online (Byron, 2008)[4]. Again, the report circulates a growing superstition of the ways that parents are distanced from their children in cyberspace. This is not to say that this research is not essential – it certainly is – the issue is the growing number of social problems that are being related to the use of the Internet. The irony in this debate is that most MySpace users are fully aware of the risks involved with using the Internet (see Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2007; McCullagh, 2008).

In the case of MySpace, the profile information constitutes part of a '*public identity performance*' (boyd & Heer, 2006: emphasis added). Therefore, it is the public aspect of the profile that is essential to the way it is presented. MySpace users are intentionally public as it fulfils a range of social accomplishments on a global scale. It has been found that teenagers typically have profiles on a variety of different sites which may advance the possibility that they use different SNS (Livingstone,

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[4] The Bryon Review is an independent review commissioned by the government looking at the risks to children from exposure to potentially harmful video games or inappropriate material on the Internet. Full details can be found at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/.

2008). For example, a user my have a public profile on MySpace and a more private profile on Facebook. This shows that the users are at the centre of the decision to make a profile public or private. However, these issues are clouded in the media projection of the powerlessness of SNS users.

The Internet is a spectacle for institutions to demonstrate their grasp of current ethical matters. Again, this is not disputing the fact that some guidelines are, of course, necessary for the protection of online users. However, it appears that the recent media coverage of this issue has catapulted the Internet into an area of repeated discussion and refinement. So much so, that one worries if controversial studies in psychology are still receiving the ethical scrutiny they deserve. MySpace is a public social network site where people have conversations and share stories. It is not the most damaging of places that should be treated with continual scepticism and suspicion. The outcome of this speculation is emphasised in the way Internet research is on occasion referred to as the practice of 'lurking'.

6.5 Lurking

MySpace is a public SNS where two thirds of profile pages have been found to be world visible (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Thelwall, 2008b). In the same way that television programmes and newspaper reports do not require ethical approval some academics have argued that the same rules should apply for sites like MySpace and other SNSs (Giles, 2007). On some occasions, researchers have chosen to observe the profiles of many users without seeking the approval of an Institutional Review Board (see Moreno et al., 2007; Thelwall, 2009b). Some recent research has even used the profile of the researcher, as the basis for the investigation, so as not to encounter any pages that were private (Magnuson & Dunes, 2008). This would conduct the investigation from 'inside' the SNS.

The ability to observe public spaces has been referred to by some researchers as a form of 'lurking' and subsequently constituting some form of unethical practice (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002; Fox et al., 2005). In a recent edition of *The Psychologist,* David Giles explains how 'anything on the internet that is not password-protected is public domain material, equivalent to reader's letters in a newspaper, regardless of what the contributors believe about the accessibility of the material' (Giles, 2007: 434). Giles, following Joshua Gamson, continues how the idea of the lurker is only felt by the 'lofty academic' who is disassociated with new forms of research.

Gamson (1998) argues how many people have grown to use the Internet as a way of identifying oneself with a particular social group. This may be useful for understanding issues that are taking on a new dimension in online domains. For example, the use of MySpace has shown to be highly popular for anorexia sufferers ('pro-ana profiles'). This space offers an increased level of visibility and communication to users who wish to avoid face-to-face conditions. Research on this topic allows an understanding of how people experience issue of anorexia that could not be accessed through other means. It is for this reason that research in this area is essential. This shows that the label adds a layer of negativity to a new research practice that has a large amount of potential in the future.

6.6 Ethics and Feeling

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of all universities are beginning to increase their scepticism of Internet based research due to the recent media attention and other forms of official activity. For example, the BPS (British Psychological Society) emphasises issues such as 'informed consent' and 'levels of control' as being crucial to the use of internet data. The following statement is taken from the BPS working party guidelines and outlines what is seen as the main concerns for Internet based research:

> In IMR [Internet Mediated Research] researchers do not have control over who the participants are, the environmental conditions they are responding under, variations in the research procedure due to different hardware and software configurations, what other activities or distractions are taking place simultaneously, participants feelings and motivation and how they react to the research procedure. (BPS, 2007: 5)

From the above quote it is clear that ethics is certainly about control, particular in terms of research conducted over the Internet. Control in terms of 'who the participants are' and how they will react to a particular research procedure. For experimental procedures it is obviously important to know how participants will react to different conditions, however, this is not always the case for research in the social sciences. In this research for example, it is crucial that the researcher is unaware of the people who would be included in the MySpace search and that they would act in a

way that felt natural to them. It was also important that the research did not focus on any particular group of age or gender. Therefore, the concept of control is very different in this form of research to the clinical nature of control that is outlined by the BPS.

Furthermore, what is most notable from the BPS quote is a word that frequently manages to avoid ethical discussions - feeling. Ethics is about how we feel, how we feel when we are conducting the research, how we feel when first deciding to conduct a project, and most importantly, how the participants feel during the investigation. It is this sense of feeling that fails to be present in the organisation of ethical guidelines. Feeling is also growing as a prominent area of study more generally (see Cromby, 2007). However, many will argue that the IRBs form a barrier that aids the judgement of the psychologist in the decision making process – so there is no need for feeling. The consequence of this decision is that people might not think about research in a way that they should. It also means that the inevitable scrutiny of the IRB fails to let many interesting projects get off the ground. Thrift (2003: 108) notices '[how] new forms of ethics closes down some of the main means by which we learn about others and other cultures'.

This issue was addressed in a recent is of *The Times Higher Education* supplement entitled 'MySpace and Red Tape: Will red tape hit web data use'[5]. The report highlighted the problems of a high level of control through and illustrated the way that essential research may not make it through ethical clearance in the future. This issue is relates to a growing use of hypersensitive discourse around the use of SNSs that is fuelled by speculation around the 'dangers' of the Internet. This is not to say that there are no dangers, just that, given the nature of the many of the online environments, it is inappropriate to impose such strict guidelines on research procedures.

In the attempt to secure the relationship between researcher and participant there is a tendency to close-in on all those aspects of interest that made the topic appealing in the first instance. Thrift (2003) traces some of the values held by the current ethical committees through a number of different sources. Thrift argues that the bio-medical production of the *Protecting Human Subjects Handbook* marked a way of manufacturing ethics and led to such organisations as the IRB. The IRB is now

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[5] Available at http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=402665. Accessed May 2009

considered the 'gatekeeper' of ethical research proposals by some potential researchers (Amdur & Bankert, 2002). Thrift sates that we need to cultivate a sense of 'good judgement' in research ethics. The knowledge that is produced has to produce a good ethical situation for both the researcher and the researched. The researcher should be in a position to let the encounters evolve naturally while the researched 'learn to trust their judgement and go along with it' (Thrift, 2003: 120). The following discussion will explore the notion of good judgement and the way that the current study of MySpace is trying to embed a sense of feeling into the research.

Ethical choices should be moved into a space of shared activity and responsibility. Thrift argues, as researchers, we need to expand our subjectivity to take on the experience of those being studied. We need to move to a shared space of corroboration between that of participant and researcher. The ethical precautions are then able to become a natural reaction to the phenomenon itself. In this case, this involves having a good judgement about what is presented in the MySpace profiles. The current research does not change the way that the users engage with the site and they are therefore able to maintain its current use after the research has finished. Were this to be ethnography, there would have been an entirely different kind of space for the research to take place, which this may have changed the way the participants (and the researcher) would be able to view the space in the future.

Thrift (2003) refers to the space between two parties as the 'space of thoughtfulness'. For Thrift, this space requires using imaginative ways of extending our own subjectivities so that it will create a space where both the researcher and the subject can enter into. The RHM opens a space of thoughtfulness for investigation of MySpace as both parties are able to engage with the site. It has been shown that when a researcher tries to forge an ethical sense of good judgment that the research has ultimately been better for it (Thelwall & Stuart, 2006). It is as if to capture something of the imaginative ways that we live our everyday lives there first needs to be some form of imaginative turn on the behalf of the researcher.

Thrift takes this statement a step further by noticing how the lives of individuals are better when they use their imagination. In this thesis the RHM attempts to be creative with ethical issues. This is also a central idea to the work of an alternative form of ethicist – Emmanuel Levinas. To further these ideas about ethics this discussion will turn to Levinas' work and a wider conception of responsibility.

The following section will also serve as a more general introduction to Levinas' work as he features at later points in the thesis.

6.7 Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas explains a need to get outside of normative theories of ethics. For Levinas, a version of ethics needs to relate to something that depends on the actions of everybody as opposed to just a select few. In many of his core texts including: *Time and the Other* (1987), *Totality and Infinity* (1969), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981/1997) there features the role of the 'other'. The 'other' is a way of exploring the irreducible and irresolvable tensions that are caused by the attempt to *totalize* everything. The 'other' is explained as different to the self in every way and it has a kind of power over the self that commands it to take responsibility for its actions. It could even be seen to challenge the existence of the self, even in a sense of what the self thinks it is.

Levinas (1969) makes the difference between *totality* and *infinity* where the former is the systematic way that the self is inherently responsible, and the latter, infinity, is sensitive to the 'other' where it tries to build a global notion of responsibility. Levinas (1969) famously argues that infinity always manages to resist some form of totality. This responsibility for others extends into the way that future actions might be performed or received. It is this responsibility that is connects everybody across the globe. Levinas talks of how the responsibility for others is 'infinite'. We are all the responsible for the actions that are committed by the third - the 'other'. It is then, for this reason that we try to manage our relationship with the 'other' and the responsibilities of others. As Levinas (1996: 18) states, 'nothing that concerns the stranger can leave one indifferent'.

It is the expression in the language that, as Levinas would say, makes communication possible. Language does not appear ready for the others to use and requires deciphering in order to decide how react. Levinas (1985) describes an 'ethical language' in the way that ideas about the world translate into face-to-face relations. This commands the 'other' into an exchange of ethical language. Levinas is keen to point out the way that the 'other' prompts action from the self. It states how someone *must do* something in a reply to a face-to-face interaction (coming face-to-face with another self). When Levinas speaks of the 'face' in face-to-face relationships he is intrigued by the way that people immediately have a responsibility to that person.

For Levinas, human beings are different to everything else in reality and it is only through a western rationalism that the differences between people appear to be eradicated. The 'same' is opposed to the 'other' in a way of representing the western notion of the self that is produced through a reductionist engagement with the world. The main way that this reduction is understood, in Levinas' terms, is through the subordination of *violence*. Violence is conducted on the self and by the self. In a classic passage on violence, Levinas (1990: 6) explains:

> Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act; as if the rest of the universe were only there to receive the action. Violence is also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating on it.

Ethical decisions should not then be taken without thinking of the 'other', without thinking of every person who is affected by the decision. This will open up a space for research that has considered the impact on the entire community. A breach of this ethical consideration produces what Levinas refers to as violence, when one individual acts without considering the 'other'. Levinas (1999) states that communities are imagined through the potential face-to-face contact with other users, and furthermore, that it is the face of the 'other' where a feeling of what is *yet to happen* is ascertained. This gives further clarity to the concept of mediated community, whereby, it is in the imagined connection of MySpace users that they sense a feeling of how communication will progress in the future. Following Levinas, MySpace and other forms of new media have recently been recognised as a form of 'responsibili*ty*-provoking technology' (Millington, 2009). Therefore, Levinas' ideas about responsibility are filtering into other conversations about the role of technology where there is a need for a global understanding of ethics (Gorman, 2000).

6.7.1 Levinas and the Study of MySpace

The RHM is intentionally directed away from any notions of violence. Many of the problems that are associated with research over the Internet could be reduced by a simple consideration of the 'other'. This would involve building a more sensitive relationship with the 'other' that responds to the universal issues that are confronted in

Internet research. However, in continuing to follow Levinas, issues of this kind will never reach a conclusion, a totality. The issue around Internet research relates to a wider notion of responsibility that is constantly changing in light of new opinions and technological developments. It is for this reason that the best way to manage the issues around Internet ethics is to be continually open to suggestion and sensitive to the 'other'.

Levinas explains that new technologies encourage the possibility of ethical responsibility. It is only when technology is linked with social groups that people will strive to use the technology negatively, thus causing a form of violence for Levinas. Technology is to be determined by the people who use it and not an inherent nature to the technology. Levinas criticises Heidegger (1977) and his ideas on technology as 'mysterious and dangerous'. Instead, Levinas shows how technology promotes the sense of liberal democratic views that will lead to an increased possibility of justice in the face of the 'other'. As Hutchens (2004: 135) states:

> Levinas takes umbrage at the idea that mankind is situated within a world that can only be depicted as either a mysterious space or the locus of calculative thinking and utilitarian function. Instead, he regards it as likely that the world consists of a network of social arrangements through which we discover the wonders of our world.

From the above quote, technology is about people and the way they are able to live their lives. Technology is not a *mystery* in the way that it often becomes an extension of many of the social situations that we regularly find ourselves in. It should not be seen as inherently dangerous (which could be said of the governing bodies such as the IRBs) but as one of the ways that we discover the 'wonders of our world'. For that reason, it is essential that we explore new technologies like MySpace. To access this phenomenon the research has to think about the impact on every single member of the community (or the 'other'). This chapter has tried to be sensitive to the 'other' by exploring the wider issues that are confronted by the decision to investigate MySpace.

6.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the ethical considerations taken in decision to study MySpace. The design of RHM intentionally avoids interrupting the MySpace community and does not stop communication from progressing in a natural way. To ensure the safety of the online participants a number of measures were taken to guarantee the protection of the MySpace users. This included concealing all names and addresses and the destruction of the data after the investigation. The implications of this research also gave the opportunity to discuss some of the wider issues surrounding Internet research in the social sciences. To some extent, the Internet has become a spectacle of modern life that is used to mobilise a number of other fears about privacy and confidentiality. This is recognised as an irrational fear and the wider context of research ethics needs to be taken into consideration.

This chapter illustrates the importance of feeling in social science research. Ethical commitments should be included in the researcher's ability to feel what is good or bad about a piece of research. Through what Thrift would describe as 'good judgment' the social sciences should be able to formulate ethical practices that create a sensitive space for research to take place. The notion of feeling connects with other aspects of this thesis that define the intuitive way that people are able act into everyday situations (cf. the notion of mediated community). In a similar sense, the ethical feeling that is required for all scientific research should not be overlooked in the practice of gathering data from the Internet. The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate the changing shape of ethics and show the high level of feeling that has been incorporated into the current investigation of MySpace.

The final aspects of this chapter discussed the links with an older form of ethical theory in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The notion of the 'other' is helpful in applying the notion of good judgment to the study of new SNSs. If one was to consider the role of the researcher as a moral agent then the ethical vision of this research is to create a space that incorporates an awareness of all possible others in the community. This chapter marks the end of the introductory chapters to this thesis. The following chapters form the analysis of the data, the first of which is a statistical investigation of the MySpace data.

Chapter 7:

Statistical Analysis of MySpace Member Profiles

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse the MySpace data from a statistical approach. The findings of this analysis will inform the following qualitative approach in the rest of the analysis. The purpose for this statistical analysis is to draw out any immediate areas of interest in the data. Thelwall (2008b:2) argues that 'basic demographic data is essential to set previous results in a wider context'. However, in this case, the statistical analysis is being conducted before the other forms of analysis. This will aid the main areas of qualitative analysis and connect the research with the CMC tradition that predominately uses methods of this kind.

Quantitative forms of analysis have been successful in documenting the widespread nature of interaction online. Jones (2002) identifies the high number of college students that are online and how many of these users first engaged with Internet technologies at an earlier age. Now, a statistical analysis of the MySpace data might not flag up such powerful results as the work conducted by Jones (based on the fact that only has data from100 people), but it may show some areas of the data that will be useful in the later sections of the thesis. The statistical analysis of the data will also attempt to break down the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative forms of investigation.

This chapter aims to analyse biographical information from the MySpace pages that have been self-reported by the user. This is different to the traditional way of recording such information from a MySpace profile that is usually gathered using a specific program (for example, a webcrawler program that automatically records data from a webpage). The use of a webcrawler program would typically record the information that people input during the sign-up process to an SNS. Alternatively, this analysis will measure the way people present their information on their profile page as opposed to the information they produced during the sign-up process (there, of course,

may be no difference between these two things). This bases the analysis on information that was intended to be seen by others.

The analysis that will follow is comprised of two main parts: the first is the basic set of descriptive statistics that will gather a range of data from the MySpace profiles and the second is a more in-depth analysis that is focussed on exploring issues from the initial descriptive statistics. These areas will be chosen from the basic descriptive statistics as warranting further investigation. The data was collected from the screenshots of the 100 profiles. The 100 profiles were read for the following information:

- Age
- Gender
- Number of friends
- Received posts
- Sent posts
- Location
- Sexual orientation
- Ethnicity
- Attitude to children
- Number of profile changes
- Number of (web)blog entries
- What are they are here for
- Public or private profile

7.2 Results

The study of 100 MySpace members consisted of 60 males and 40 females who were averagely 25 years old ($M = 25.62$, $SE = 6.737$). Table 1 shows the average age, number of friends, received/sent posts, number of blogs and number of profile changes for each of the 100 MySpace members. The statistics on age and number of friends were reported directly from the MySpace profile (as they were presented on the profile page). The other information (including sent/received posts, number of

blogs etc.) was gathered over the period of study. Therefore, the number of profile changes is the average number of profile changes that were recorded over the period of one month.

On average, most users update their profile 3 times per month and at regular intervals (approximately once a week). The highest number of profile changes is 23 and the average number of blogs over one month is 2 (with the highest being only 5). The average number of friends is found to be 216 where the highest number of friends is 2227 and lowest is 2. Table 1 shows the females have a higher mean number of friends (235) than the males (200). This may have been due to one of the female participants having the aforementioned 2227 friends. The mode value of friends could not be calculated as there were four possible values that could represent the highest value. Table 1 shows that the average number of blogs and profile changes is 2-3 but the mode values were 0 for the majority of participants.

Gender	Average	Age	Friends	Received Posts	Sent Posts	Number of Blogs	Profile Changes
Female	Mean	24	235	22	8	2	3
	Median	24	109	15	5	2	2
	Mode	22	N/A	4	0	0	0
Male	Mean	26	200	20	7	2	3
	Median	24	100	11	2	1	2
	Mode	18	N/A	9	0	0	0
Total	Mean	25	216	21	7	2	3
	Median	24	100	11	2	1	2
	Mode	22	N/A	4	0	0	0

Table 1. Table Showing Averages of the MySpace Data.

The lowest number of friends also has an extra level of meaning when we remember that the sign-up process involves automatically becoming friends with one of the co-founders (Tom Anderson). So in actual fact, if the recorded number of friends is 2, then the actual number of friends is only 1. At the other end of the scale this immediately gives a reason why being in the 'top 8' may have some kind of social resonance with those users who have a colossal number of friends. Recent research has found that profiles that have at least 200 friends have been linked with a high

level of social status (Vanden Boogart, 2006; Walther et al., 2008). This is also of particular relevance considering human beings are apparently only capable of maintaining 150 social relationships (Dunbar, 2007).

This data shows that many of the users have over 200 friends. Alternatively, there is a high probability of a threshold effect where a user with fewer than 200 friends may not appear to have high social status and subsequently having over 200 friends is considered normal for a MySpace user. Therefore, high numbers of friends is commonplace as opposed to being somehow exceptional or extraordinary. Many users have hundreds of friends that are predominantly acquaintances or even complete strangers (boyd, 2006; Thelwall, 2008b). The number of friends in MySpace is an area of the data that would warrant further statistical analysis, particular when combined with the issue of gender. Previous research has shown that women are primarily interested in friendship and men are more interested in dating in SNSs (Pew Research for the People and the Press, 2007).

In looking at the data there also appears to be a large difference in the number of sent and received posts across the data set (Table 1). This appears to be the case for both males and females. This warrants further analysis into the relationship between the numbers of wall posts a user sends and other factors. From the data it would appear that there is a connection between number of posts and age/gender. This will require conducting a precise stratification of age to explore the number of sent/received posts.

The raw data (Appendix 1) also shows that the area of profile changing requires further investigation as it would appear there is a correlation between the number of friends and the number of profile changes. One hypothesis is that many of the users who make large numbers of profile changes also have large numbers of friends. As the highest number of profile changes was 23 there is clearly the potential to make a large amount of changes. The issue of profile changes is one that has also been overlooked in the short history of studying SNSs. The issue of profile changes warrants further statistical analysis. This could be best achieved by looking for the links between the number of friends and the number of profile changes.

The results show four areas that require further statistical analysis. These four areas are: the relationship between the number of friends and gender, age and wall posting differences, age/ gender and received/sent post differences and profile changes and the number of friends. The following sections of this chapter will

investigate each of these areas in turn. This will once again use the data gathered from the MySpace pages to look for statistical links in more detail. The analytic procedure for any analysis of this kind will first require a brief introduction.

7.3 Analytic Procedure

The analysis presents descriptive statistics and correlations of the date using SPSS. In this report the term 'significant' is used to denote a statistical difference of p less than 0.05. This explains the probability of obtaining a result by chance alone (the null hypothesis). In obtaining a result below 0.05 the null hypothesis is rejected and the findings are considered significant at the 5% level. The null hypothesis is that any relationship between the age, gender, number of friends or profile changes in the MySpace activity occurs only by chance.

7.4 Further Analysis 1: Friends and Gender

The first in-depth analysis conducted a regression analysis using a Levene's test on the relationship between gender and the number of friends. Levene's test is an inferential statistic used to asses the equality of variance in different samples. Due to the nature of the data, a Levene's test was chosen as it does not assume homogeneity of variance as with other forms of analysis of variance or t-tests. As the data was gathered from MySpace profiles there is no underlying normality in the data. If the resulting p value is less than the critical value (.05) then there is a significant chance that the relationship between the gender and the number of friends did not occur by chance.

The results of the Levene's test show that female participants have a greater amount of friends ($M = 235$, $SE = 13.457$) compared to male participants ($M = 200$, $SE = 7.690$). There was a significant difference between the conditions (t = 2.487, df = 77.625, $p = 0.0075$, one-tailed). However, these results cannot be verified as the test also shows that there was no equality of variance (the Levene's test having produced a p value that is less than 0.05). Therefore, in assessing the accuracy of the regression model, for how the observed data fits the model, it is necessary to observe the residuals. In this case, studentized residuals have been used to overcome the problem of having no easy cut-off point for particularly large residuals. A studentized residual offers the same properties as a standardised residual but usually provides a more precise estimate of the error variance of a specific case. It is calculated by taking the

unstandardised residual and dividing it by an estimate of its standard deviation that varies point-by-point.
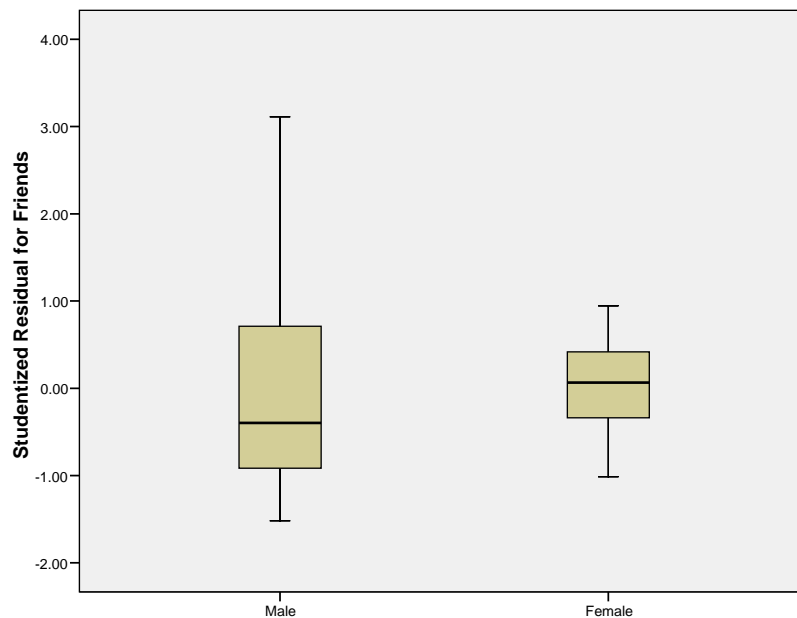

Figure 5. Box plot of studentized residual of friends across gender.

Figure 5 represents a box plot of studentized residuals for friends compared to gender. The box plot clearly shows the greater amount of friends (indicated by the wider box plot with a more centralised median line) for the male category. This is different to the earlier averages for both categories that showed the female category to have the highest number of friends. This indicates that the male category may have the greater range of friends across the sample. This data is skewed by the one female user who has a high number of friends (2227) that makes it difficult to gauge an average number of friends in data of this kind. It may be the case that with a larger sample size either of these differences would become more apparent. This shows that the relationship between number of friends and gender is difficult variable to measure in this way. In the next piece of analysis the relationship between age and posting differences are to be discussed.

7.5 Further Analysis 2: Age and Posting Differences

A Spearman's correlation coefficient, *r*, was used to analyse the non-parametric statistics between age and posting differences. This form of analysis is necessary due to the fact that the data violates the parametric assumptions of a normal distribution. To enable the use of a Spearman's Rho (r) the raw data is transformed into ranks and the differences between the ranks are calculated. Spearman's Rho determines the statistical dependency between two ranked variables. The statistic assesses how well the relationship between two variables can be described in a given order. If there are no repeated data values a perfect correlation of +1 will appear in the data. The same rank is assigned to each of the equal values of the MySpace data. Spearman's Rho produces an average of the positions in the ascending ranked order. This is different to a Pearson's correlation that assumes that both variables are normally distributed and that the two variables occupy the same relative position. The Spearman's Rho is appropriate when one of the distributions is markedly skewed. This analysis shows no significant correlation between age and the received/sent posts difference (rho = -0.175, N = 98, p = 0.086). The use of a regression line shows how there is only a very small change in the amount of posts sent/received as the age of the user increases (Figure 6).
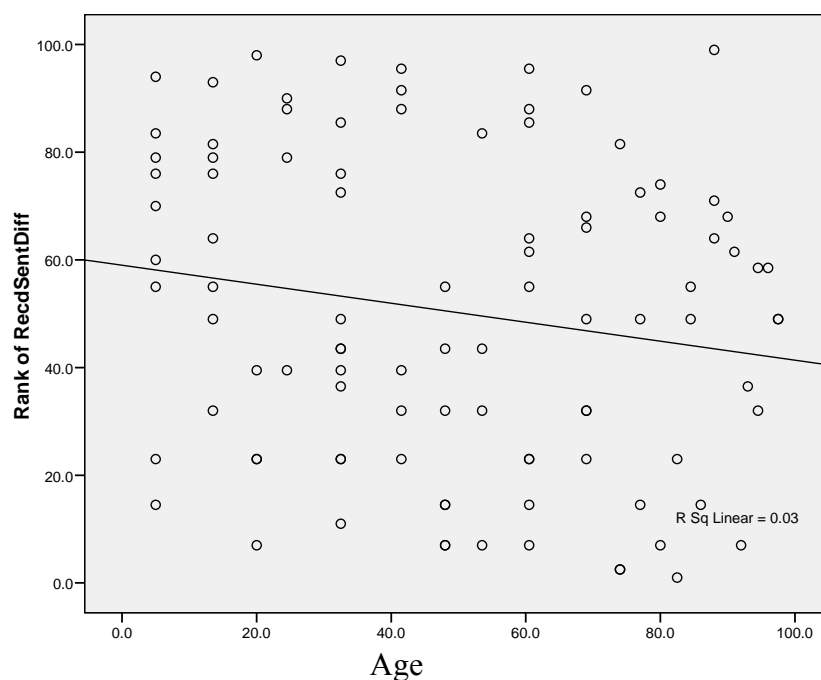

Figure 6. Spearman's analysis of age compared to number of sent/received posts.

Even though the data shows no significant relationship between the ranked groups of both sent/received posts and the group for age, there is a slight tip in the regression line that may indicate a possible relationship between the two variables (Figure 6). Perhaps, if this analysis of wall posting was also to include the effect of gender it would produce more significant results? This is the next topic for further analysis and will involve combining age, gender and sent/received posts.

7.6 Further Analysis 3: Age, gender and received/sent post differences

In this analysis the effect of age and gender are analysed alongside the received/sent posting differences. This is intends to explore the possibilities that the interaction between age and gender could have an effect on the posting differences. The analysis uses a between-subjects univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) to investigate the estimated mean scores of the ranked received/sent post differences for age, gender and the interaction between age and gender combined. Testing for a relationship between age, gender and received/sent posts first required to rank the received/sent posts difference to remove data violations. This restored Levene's p value to above .05 ($p = 0.803$) and allowed the data now shows no violations.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Received - Sent Posts Difference

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	140.503	1	140.503	1.182	.280
AgeBinned	1300.879	4	325.220	2.736	.034
Gender * AgeBinned	893.992	4	223.498	1.880	.121
Error	10104.433	85	118.876		
Corrected Total	12639.958	94			

Table 2. Showing age and gender compared to received/sent posting differences

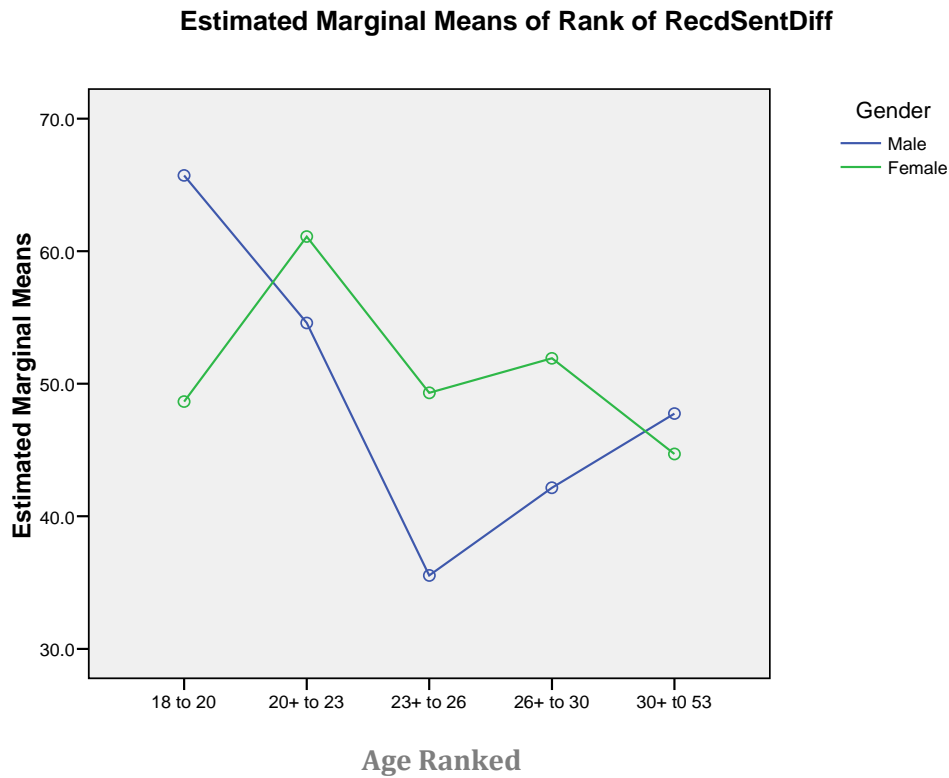**Estimated Marginal Means of Rank of RecdSentDiff**

Figure 7. Estimated marginal means of ranked received/sent post differences according to ranked age.

Table 2 shows that results of the ANOVA where there is no significant effect of gender and age combined with the received/sent post variable ($F_{(1, 88)} = 0.121$, $p > 0.0005$). From looking at the graph of the estimated marginal means (Figure 7) there is clearly no effect of the interaction between age and gender on the number of received/sent posts. This is of interest as the number of wall posts does not seem to be affected by either age or gender. Although, once again, from looking at the graph it appears that the number of wall posts in the 23 to 26 age group seems to drop considerably. This is not a significant difference but does indicate that this mid-range age group has fewer posts than other age groups. This difference appears to be mimicked in both male and female categories. Figure 7 also seems to indicate that the younger age group, particularly in terms of the male category, may send and receive more wall posts. In the final piece of analysis the data is explored in search of a relationship between the number of profile changes and the number of friends.

7.7 Further Analysis 4: Profile changes and number of friends

In the final stage of the analysis a Spearman's Rho correlation was used to test the relationship between profile changes and the number of friends. As with the test for age and posting differences, the non-parametric data calls for a test that ranks the data into meaningful units to allow the use of a Spearman's correlation coefficient. This test shows a significant difference between profile changes and the number of friends ($rho = 0.232$, $N = 99$, $p = 0.021$, two-tailed). Therefore, the more friends will lead to a higher number of sent/received wall posts and vice versa.
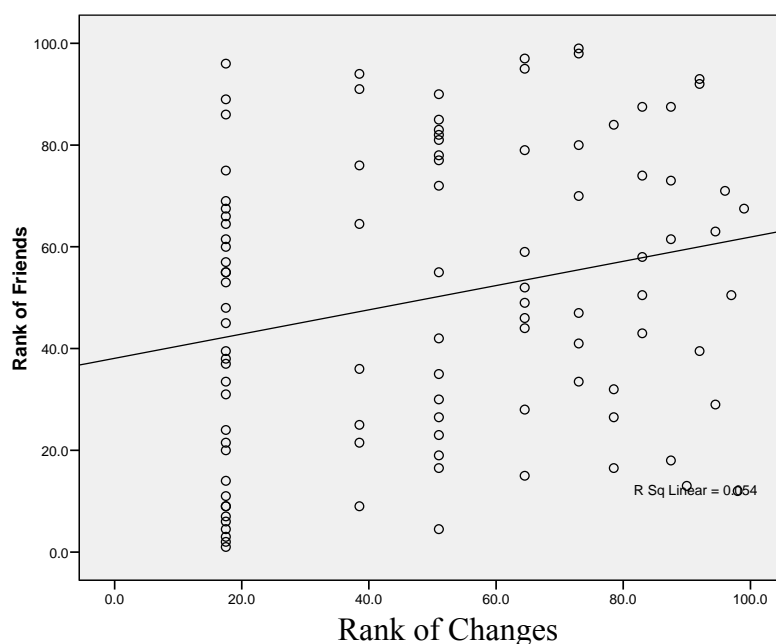
Figure 8. Regression line showing rank of friends compared to rank of number of profile changes.

The amount of friends a user has increases the probability that they will make an increased number of profile changes and vice versa. Figure 8 represents a regression line of the findings, wherein the positive correlation between the two variables can be clearly seen. This can be tied in with other research that has found a relationship between the number of friends and social status (Walther, 2008; Vanden Boogart, 2006). If an increased number of friends equals an increased number of profile changes then one would assume that the increased level of social status could be the

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cause (or the effect) of the increased amount of profile changes. Profile changing is an under developed area of SNS research that, based on this evidence, requires further investigation. One of the central propositions is that the increased amount friends results in a high social status that in turn causes a high number of profile changes. The concept of profile changing is one that needs a thorough analysis and would benefit from inclusion in the qualitative aspects of the investigation.

7.8 Chapter Summary

The analysis in this chapter shows some useful findings to be further discussed in the following qualitative forms of analysis. At a basic level, the statistics show the data cohort average age is 25 with an equal split in terms of gender (60 males, 40 females). The basis statistics show that females have an averagely higher number of friends than males (although this was found to the inverse in a later form of analysis so should be used with some discretion). Age is not found to influence the amount of MySpace activity (based on the number sent/received posts) even when combined with the effect of gender. These findings support many of the previous findings of SNS research that typically identifies the average user to be female and under 25 years of age (Thelwall, 2008b).

The statistical analysis of the MySpace data shows that there is a significant relationship between the number of friends and the number of profile changes. If we continue these findings then there is a possibility that the high social status is related to the phenomenon of profile changing. Profile changing is an under-researched area of SNSs that should be continued in the qualitative data. The statistical analysis has highlighted areas of MySpace use that will become the focal point of the following qualitative analysis. The focus of wall posting, profile changes and blogs form an outline of the following qualitative analytic chapters. These chapters will study a range of practices in MySpace from different locations on the profile. The first qualitative analytic chapter is dedicated to the use of wall posting and will analyse the data from those members who have shown to be statistically avid users of their page. The extracts presented in the following analytic chapters are representative of the data cohort as a whole.

Chapter 8:

The Relational Self in Wall Posts

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore three separate examples of MySpace conversations. Each of these conversations took place on the wall section of profile. Wall posting is a natural place to begin qualitative analysis as it is the most visible site of communication in MySpace. The wall posts are linked together using the individual time signatures that are assigned to each post. The analysis will focus on the ability to constitute the self through the language in wall communication. From this approach, the constructionist position is immediately recognisable in the way the self is treated as the performance of everyday social relations in MySpace.

The earlier discussion of CMC approach identified the importance of the first time two (or possibly more) people come into contact through the use of the Internet, the language they use and the subsequent relations that they build from this meeting (Short et al., 1976; Sproull & Kiesler, 1998). This analysis will begin by following a similar line of questioning and in doing so will connect with the conversation analytic tradition that has also traditionally explored the initiation of communication (Sacks 1992; Schegloff, 1986, 1989; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). This will utilise aspects of the discursive sequencing principle outlined as one of the key analytic resources in this analysis. This chapter will explore the collective way that language constitutes the performance of self through social relationships in MySpace wall conversations. This begins with a conversation between two people - Liam and Jane.

Extract 1. Wall post conversation between Liam and Jane

The first extract is taken from two MySpace users who are discussing a possible trip to Cornwall. In this exchange we see Liam's continuing attempts to arrange a visit to meet with Jane. The conversation takes place over a few hours and seems to be structured in a synchronous form of communication. The data will be presented in the way it would have appeared on the MySpace and will be analysed in sequence.

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:31
	Hello Jane how's things? How's life in sunny old Kernow?

The exchange begins with Liam initiating the conversation around 'sunny old Kernow'. There is immediately a shared knowledge of 'Kernow' that that has some interactional relevance for both parties involved. We can assume that the use of 'Kernow' is intended to locate the position of one another. It works to discursively 'settle in' the nature of the conversation in an informal style with no real sense of urgency or persuasive function (Heritage, 2005: Psathas, 1999). The reply from Jane echoes this function:

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:33
	heya not bad thanks, got a day off today but its not sunny :-(u back from oman yet? x

In the return post it is clear that Liam's 'sunny old' reference does not go unnoticed. The reference to the weather is used to initiate the conversation as Jane writes 'got the day off today but its not sunny'. The use of paralanguage (depicting a sad face) constructs a connection that defends against the possibility of misinterpretation in her line 'its not sunny'. The line 'you back from Oman yet' then performs knowledge of Liam's recent movements and that his time away is limited in nature (one explanation could be that Liam is in the Military). The conversation appears to have an unproblematic style where the two parties construct an existing set of relations. The following two turns will be analysed jointly as they appear in such quick succession.

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:35
	Yeah im on leave for a month. I'm so bored! I'm thinking of coming down at some point. I'm fed up with this place it's doing my head in! aaahggghh!

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:38
	where u 2? back up in kent with your family? its not much better down here! Bet it was well hot out there by the time you had left!

The first post in this section clarifies Liam's military position and constructs his current position on 'leave'. Here, we also begin to see that Liam is communicating for a reason – he wants to organise to a trip to see Jane. The possibility of the trip appears to be instigated by Liam as he writes 'I'm thinking of coming down at some point'. This generic discourse could be seen as openings and nested questions in the conversation analytic tradition (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). However, Jane's reaction is not entirely positive towards the suggested trip, 'where u? Back up in Kent with your family'. This shows Jane problematising his boredom with construction of a moral undertone that is based on limited time with his family (presumably because he is away with the military frequently) and then secondly with the counter that 'it's not much better down here'.

These subtle moves deal with the possibility of a trip in a way that manages something of the relational self. It is through the interaction that the self is constituted. In the final section of the post Jane steers the conversation in another direction towards the 'safety topic' of the weather when she writes 'bet it was well hot out there by the time you left'. Liam accepts the topic of weather as can be seen in the following posts:

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:40
	Yeah just in little old kent. I would rather be in cornwall right now. Yeah, the temp was up to 57 I think when I left. It was really unbearable heat! And now im back in the freezing cold again woo hoo!

First, we see the use of 'little old' that has the same semantic qualities as 'sunny old Kernow' in the first post. This is used to broaden the category from wanting to see Jane to the way that it would be nice to be in Cornwall, which is premised on a shared indexical relationship to Kernow. The final section of the wall post contributes to the ongoing conversation of the weather that grounds the communication is something tangible and avoids the possibility of overstating the desire to meet ('it was up to 57 when we left'). This keeps the conversation open whilst still trying to stress the significance of the visit. In these posts social accomplishments have been set against the conversational backdrop of the weather.

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:42
	god thats so hot!! i went to bulgaria in may with a friend when ads was away an the hottest it got there was 37 an that was me sat by a pool an i found that too hot coudlnt imagine working in it!

Again, we see a reluctance from Jane to engage with the real purpose of Liam's conversation as Jane orientates towards the topic of the weather. The short narrative of a trip to Bulgaria gives weight to her performance of the weather discourse and constructs the interaction in a different direction to the possibility of Liam's visit. There is also the introduction of a new character in the shape of 'ads' who has not featured in the conversation up until this point but clearly has significance to both parties. There is a further reference to ads in the following post from Liam:

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:43
	nah it's not nice at all! I think the humidity was 90% aswell which didnt help one little bit! Whats ad's up to today?

This post clearly shows the two different aspects to this exchange. The weather has become a safe language that punctuates some of the other formulations to which both retreat as a means of replying or maintaining the conversation. Liam comments on the humidity of the conditions in Oman which ties in with the earlier narrative of Jane's trip to Bulgaria. The final line of the post, 'what is ads up to today?' has replaced the usual position in the message that would be occupied by the possibility of Liam making a trip to Cornwall. The location of 'ads' also seems to have further interactional significance in Jane's reply:

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:44
	yeah i cant even begin to imagine what its like, i have no idea what hes doing.

This post shows Jane's need to clarify her relationship with 'ads'. In her previous post she mentioned that she went to Bulgaria 'while ads was away', which seems imply a close proximal relationship (i.e. Jane was able to go away because ads was away). However, from this post it appears that Jane is keen to construct her position on the relationship with ads as one that is not dependent on his location. The sentiment of Jane's posts seems to display a powerful repositioning of her relationship with ads. This message contains no self-protecting weather discourse and stands out from the rest of the conversation. It is as if the message could have been intended for the mediated community, not just Liam. The following post shows Liam's reply to this assertion:

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:45
	Ok then, what are you upto on this fine day? lol

Instead of accepting the distance of from ads, Liam tries to be more light-hearted with the construction of his post and reverts the focus back to Jane's activities. He writes 'what are you upto on this fine day lol', thereby recognising the boldness of Jane's previous statement. The use of the term 'lol' (which would assume to mean 'laugh out loud') seems to discursively protect the sentence from carrying an overemphasised sense of formality. In the same way that the weather provided a earlier way to manage the way that sentence is interpreted, it appears that here, the use of the paralanguage 'lol' strategically manages that chance that the question might be received literally.

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:47
	Not very much, gona go shopping in a little while. Its my birthday next week so im trying to plan what to do for next weekend just having a bit of chill out day really, u up to anything exciting??

In this post it seems that Jane does take the literal meaning of the question and replies with her outlook for the upcoming day. After the intensity of the previous posts it appears that there is a return of the banal aspects of her life that keep the style of discourse at a more generic level. For example, Jane comments on how she is planning a shopping trip and organising her upcoming birthday arrangements. Neither of these activities seems to be communicated in a way that would signal involvement from Liam. The end of this post constructs a relaxed nature as Jane states 'just having a bit of a chill out day really, u up to anything exciting??' This shows a relaxed performance to the conversation that does not reveal any further personal information. It also serves to normalise the category of Cornwall (and hence Jane) as being 'not

exciting' and subsequently providing no reason to take a trip to Cornwall. The final question appears open to continuing the conversation.

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:48
	This is as exciting as my leave gets really. Apart from wasting my money on big pissups all the time. Ive got a night out on friday planned but thats about it. What date is your birthday?

From this post it can be seen that Liam is again displaying his dissatisfaction with his current position. Even the prospect of 'big pissups' seem to be thwarted by the way that it wastes his money. It could be suggested that the Liam is still interested in organising a trip to Cornwall as the issue of wasting his money could be a prefix to doing something more productive with the money. This can then be linked with the way he finishes the message – 'what day is your birthday?'

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:51
	haha oh dear! well its the 22nd august ive got the day off but ill probably save going out until the weekend i think. Was trying to plan a trip to newquay but it just became mission impossible too many different people that live in different places so thats out the window ill probably just end up in falmouth or truro as per usual!!

In the reply to Liam's question it is clear that Jane's reaction provides a rationale for why Liam would not want to go to Jane's party. The message begins with the date and highlights the exciting nature of the day in having 'the day off'. The post then shifts in the discursive marker in the use of the word 'but' (Schiffrin, 1996). It is this 'but' that begins a narrative that constructs the reasons for avoiding a trip because of 'too many people that live in different places'. It presents a situation where the only reason why he should make such a long trip would be if it was a special occasion - and this is

definitely not a special occasion of this kind ('ill probably just end up in falmouth or truro as usual'). The conversation appears to be drawing to a close as the continuation of the narrative has exhausted the content of both strands of the communication (the weather and the possibility of a trip). Each narrative has been subtly moved into a position where the end of the conversation is immanent. This is referred to as 'closings' in the conversation analytic tradition (Patterson & Potter, 2009; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

Liam	15 Aug 2007 4:54
	Fair enough but just remember it's your birthday noone elses. You enjoy yourself no matter where you end up going!

Liam accepts the end of the conversation with the statement 'Fair enough' and gives a good impression of the outcome of the conversation. The final section of the message constructs a position that avoids the possibility of any negative accountability of his attempts to plan a trip to Cornwall. Through the use of the line 'you enjoy yourself and enjoy yourself no matter where you end up going' there is a strong sense of a discourse that performs a positive relation between the two people.

Jane	15 Aug 2007 4:55
	Cheers hun, hope you have a good day x

In the final post Jane has not attempted to work with Liam's final comment on it being her 'birthday and no one elses'. Jane's final post even features a high amount of sentiment through the use of 'hun' and the singular kiss at the end of the post. In

many ways this action seems to thank for Liam accepting the discursive rejection of the trip. The entire exchange occurred over a relatively short period of time and had a synchronous form. This is similar to face-to-face communication in the way that both members take the appropriate turn to speak, formulate a reply based on that which came before, and come to a natural end to each of the topics before moving on.

In this example Liam and Jane use the conversation to perform online constructions of the self. As can be seen in the first extract, the implications of different performances of the self can lead to range of interactional complexities (e.g. take the reference to 'ads' in the conversation). MySpace users have to manage the multiple formations of the self through the current formation of communication. The data shows how the self is constituted through communicative functions on the wall. The mediated community is invoked through the different social actions in the conversation. Thus, the self is not just described in the profile page but it is constituted through the relations with other MySpace members.

The self is constructed through the relational connections in the use of the wall posts in MySpace. The users make sense of themselves through the ability to form different connections across the network and the friends that a user is able to maintain provide the basis for an experience in MySpace. The negotiation of the friendship, or what that friendship can be, delivers a subjective appreciation of who they are. This is the case for self in many other forms of communication but the mediation of the MySpace profile requires a specific set of social practices for constituting the self. Even in this relatively simple exchange the data shows the importance of the connection with other MySpace users. It must be recalled that all communication is visible to the rest of the mediated community. For Liam, the performance of imagined aspects of community may have produced the need for his ramped-up construction of sincerity at the end of the conversation.

Visual aspects of the wall posts also have a role in the communication. Each of the two users maintains the same profile photograph during the entirety of the conversation (if they changed the profile photograph on the main page, it would also change in the wall conversations). Both Liam and Jane appear to have close-up photographs as their main profile image (this is then the photograph that becomes added to the wall posts). The use of the profile photograph aids the connection of the relational connection in the communication. From this perspective, the self is experienced through the objects that are embedded in the communication and the

semiotic qualities of the photograph have an effect on the constitution of the self. Therefore, the self is mediated through both the visual and the textual aspects of the profile.

The exchange between Liam and Jane is what discursive psychologists might consider an *unproblematic exchange* as each posts follows on from the one before in a synchronous fashion (Goodwin, 1997). However, like in everyday life, not all conversations run exactly as they should do. In the following extract the analysis turns to the examples of communication that are slightly more problematic. In this extract one of the users has posted twice on the wall of another user without receiving a response. Therefore, there is problem in the straight form of back-and-forth style communication that was seen in Extract 1.

8.2 Initiating Conversation

How does conversation begin for those members who are not already friends? In the following extract the analysis will look at the way MySpace users can encourage a conversation to begin. In this example we follow the interaction of two MySpace users, Sally and Dave. By way of introduction, this statement is taken from the blurb section of Sally's profile page:

> hiyaaa my name is [name of user] and I am trying to break back into the huge and scary world of modeling.

The statement shows how Sally is trying to 'break back' into a modelling career. The propensity of breaking 'back' as opposed to breaking *into* may have significance for the analysis of this conversation. Sally's profile page also features a number of professionally taken photographs that have been set to rotate across the background of the profile. Sally also has a relatively small number of friends (68 at the time of the wall conversation) and has added a number of extra features to the page (one being questionnaire application that likens her to the cartoon character Marge Simpson). Comparatively, Dave is an older man with a profile picture of (what we can assume) is him and his son (the child's face has been blurred to protect the child's identity). They are both smiling directly into the camera in a shot that has been clearly taken through the use of a webcam. From Dave's profile page we can see that he is a keen football fan as he has a club emblem emblazoned across the centre of the page. In the

first extract we see that Dave has posted on Sally's wall four times before he receives a response. Here are the first four posts:

Extract 2. Wall post conversation between Dave and Sally

Dave	Mar 28 2007 6:57P
	Hello , hows it going how was your weekend hope it was good hope your doing ok

Dave	Mar 29 2007 1:55P
	lol just realised something else you will know my little brother as well he was in your year as well then ha ha

Dave	Mar 29 2007 2:02P
	cant believe you was in his year at school he comes out with us on a sunday rofl

Dave	Apr 1 2007 5:23A
	how we doin you have been quiet for a few days what you been upto

The posts in Extract 2 are presented in the reverse order to how they appear on the MySpace page in order to aid analysis. These posts are structured differently to the first extract between Liam and Jane as none of these posts feature a response from the other party. At this point in the conversation there is no communication between the

two MySpace users. There is the possibility that Sally has contacted Dave through another medium, however, this seems unlikely as the posts offer there own narrative of uninterrupted communication in Sally's profile.

In the first of the four posts Dave uses a fairly generic tone 'how was your weekend?' A post of this kind could easily be overlooked by a casual observer. The second post takes a more direct approach and invokes his brother as a possible relational connection. This shows that their relationship is relatively limited as Sally is currently considered to be unaware of their other relational ties. The third post develops this connection further and explains the connection that they share through his brother ('he comes out with us on a sunday rofl'). Dave constructs this connection as remarkable and could been interpreted as a compliment to Sally's age ('cant believe he was in your year at school'). Through the discursive creation of two categories of 'young' and 'old' Dave is complimenting Sally by orientating her to the younger group. This would presumably appeal to someone who was intending to 'break back' into modelling where the issue of age would automatically become an issue.
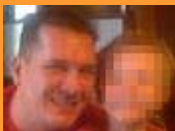
Finally, the fourth post makes relevance to the fact that Dave has yet to receive a reply to any of his posts. In each of these four posts there is a growing use of discursive strategies to find a way of beginning the conversation. In the fourth post Dave asks 'how we doing?' he uses the term 'we doing' as opposed to the term 'you'. This shows the performance of a need to re-establish their relationship. Put more simply, it asks are we (still) friends in this space? The last post literally asks 'how are *we* doing' in this space. The impact of these posts could be compared to the discursive principle of 'try marking' (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1996) where speakers typically offer a number of potential strands of communication for others to develop in a conversation. The use of the consecutive posts could be seen as an electronically mediated form of try marking.

The construction of the three posts seems to suggest that there is a need to keep the conversation alive. To the extent that in the final post Sally is accused of being 'quiet lately' and in MySpace enough time or activity has passed to check that she is still invested in their relational connection. The importance of 'breaking back' into modelling may illustrate the difficulty to decline friendships. The success of the many actors, musicians and models is widely recognised in the media through the ability to make use of sites like MySpace. Therefore, Sally may instead choose to keep her

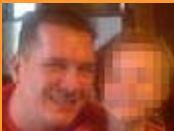friendships alive, but with only a minimal level of contact. This can be seen by Sally's eventual post:

Sally	Apr 1 2007 5:52A
	am not bad ta.you?
	whos your bro then?

The reply from Sally shows very little content compared to the four posts Dave produced earlier in the conversation. This clarifies the idea that Sally is keeping the interaction at a minimum. The post constructs a somewhat rushed post where little care has been taken for grammar and term of address. This may have been intended to give the impression of a chaotic lifestyle that would account for the earlier distance. Sally accepts the conversation around Dave's brother but does not respond to any of other questions in Dave's earlier posts. The following two turns explore the connection between Dave's brother and Sally:

Dave	Apr 1 2007 5:58A
	im fine ta my brother is Alan said he knows you apparently when we have been out he said hello to you and i was with him but dont remember

Sally	Apr 1 2007 6:12A
	no way!!! lol.i dont remember seein him since school,my memory aint that good atm though.hows he doin?your kids are so cute btw

This post marks an increase in Sally's involvement in the conversation. It appears that she shares the offline connection Dave has made. The use of the paralanguage ('lol') ramps-up her interest in speaking with Dave while protecting her from any appearance of sincerity. Sally confesses to not remembering seeing Dave's brother since school. The use of the phrase 'my memory aint that good atm[at the moment]' continues the construction of busy-ness which further performs a rationale for her earlier distance. The end of the post keeps the conversation open through asking the question 'hows he doing?' and the formation of the compliment 'your kids are so cute btw'. This repays the appearance of the earlier distance while maintaining to keep the communication interactionally at the periphery. The construction of the communication through the relation of Dave's brother significance serves as an opportunity to develop his own construction of the self:

Dave	**Apr 1 2007 6:36A**
	he is doing good full of muscles now i took him the gym when he was 17 and now he practically lives there the oh btw the kids get there cuteness from me lol

Sally	**Apr 1 2007 6:41A**
	which gym?i know a few ppl that use nik naylors.

Dave's post uses the narrative of his brother going to the gym to show something about his own interests and abilities (e.g. the use of 'I' in the first line: 'I took him to the gym'). The pronoun use positions Dave as accountable for his brother's fitness and constructs accountability for his kids 'cuteness' ('the kids get their cuteness' from

me lol'). The use of the gym becomes a point of interest and a subsequent topic of communication. Each of these discursive moves is an opportunity for Dave to construct something of the self through his communication with Sally.

The huge potential of MySpace interaction immediately poses a problem for those who have lots of friends (aspiring actors, models, musicians) in how they manage the everyday connection with other users. In this example Sally seems to control her relations by keeping many interactions at the periphery. Subsequently, conversations with some friends (like Dave) are kept outside of her immediate mediated community. In the final post we notice that Sally has reverted back to a relation connection with Dave that is personified by distance and separation. Dave's attempt to invoke a conversation that incorporates personal facts is greeted with a neutral substance of conversation ('the gym'). This peripheral communication represents a vast amount of communication in MySpace. The intention is to keep a friendship infinitely 'open' and be selective about which encounters a user enters into. There is a play on the individual and the collective in this extract as Dave uses other people (his brother) as a way of building a personal relationship. However, Sally refers to all such connections as part of a wider network in MySpace. This difference is produced in the way that Sally constitutes Dave's conversation as part of a wider network of relations whereas Dave mistakes this as a way of building a direct form of connection. The experience of the exchange is infinitely different between the two people.

As with Extract 1, there is the negotiation of the different relational connections that constitute the self. In this extract, Dave uses a sequence of posts to initiate the conversation with Jane. This is due to the problematic of how the conversation should begin. The self is constituted though such an exchange where the imagined community is aware of Dave's continued efforts to make contact with Jane, or even if they are not, Dave's construction of the self is one that wants to modify the interpretation of the unanswered posts. The use of 'his brother' and other identity categories are concerned with this attempt to constitute the self through the relational connection with Jane. This would allow a particular form of experience from the communication in MySpace.

The negotiation of the self is performed in the relational communication. Once again, the visual constitution of the profile has remained the same throughout the wall communication. Dave's use of a photograph with a child could also be protecting

against the negative implications of posting on Jane's wall a number of times without a response. The visual and the textual are designed to aid a particular kind of communication. Similarly, Jane's photograph constructs the self as an 'aspiring model' that would allow Jane to experience such a position in the mediated community. The way that Jane maintains her MySpace relations at a periphery can be further explored through Celia Lury's (1997) notion of 'intimacy without interiority'.

8.3 Interiority without Intimacy

Imagine receiving a telephone call where there seems to be no caller at the other end of the line. Given this situation most people would typically cycle through a number of questions that would hope to elicit a response, "can you hear me", "is anyone there", "is that you …" With each passing question the drive to locate the name of the caller results in a growing pressure to receive a response. If the caller is to eventually answer - "sorry I couldn't hear you because I dropped the phone" the two people are instantly united by their distrust of the mediator – "stupid phones". It is at this point that the practice of trying earlier questions to provoke a response is rendered meaningless and will no doubt disappear in the overall nature of the conversation.

What is different about communication in MySpace is that interactions carry their unanswered messages on the profile page. They carry the sentiment of past conversations with them. Not only that, but the past conversations are visible to the rest of the community. Others are aware of the attempts that people have made to communicate through the way that messages are stored-up on the page. The imagined aspect of community should not be overlooked in the interpretation of the wall posts. There may be implications for having a number of answered messages on a profile (and obviously giving out a number of messages without receiving a reply). In the above example the continuous attempts to post on Sally's wall, even when it would have been clear to him (and the rest of the mediated community), that a large proportion of his posts have gone without a reply, he still continued to post further messages. The potential implication to the rest of the community is that Sally doesn't want to talk.

However, in some respects this seems to work to Dave's advantage as the numerous attempts to draw out a conversation lead to an eventual post from Sally. What could be described as the *two-post phenomenon* (where actually the number is redundant – but it just indicates more than one) increases the likelihood that

communication will begin. This due to the increased visibility of the wall posts to the rest of the MySpace community. The two-post phenomenon is linked to the notion of 'adjacency pairs' (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) and builds a sense of connection with the post that would increase the chances of a reply. In discursive terms, when a person asks a question they typically expect some form of answer. The two-post phenomenon is a social practice in MySpace that distorts the basic function of a discursive sequence. It signals a change in the discursive sequence that performs an increased need to communicate. It could also be the reason behind the areas of the statistical analysis that showed an increased level of received posts.

The two-post phenomenon is a social practice that is able to increase the possibility of communication in MySpace. It draws on the collective impact of the posts and the shared sense of community. For Dave, the use of the two-post phenomenon is mobilising a potential to communicate. This communication is necessary as it within such a communication that the self is constituted and negotiated. The public nature of these posts means that they carry extra-interactional weight and therefore the social implications of the growing number of unanswered posts could influence the desire to respond.

Extract 2 shows how the use of his 'brother' serves as more than a mere reference point - it is construction that Dave is who he says he is. It positions his performance through the particular identity category of one who is an 'insider'. Like the earlier telephone example, the sentiment can be immediately reversed with the production of a discursive function that clarifies oneself as an 'insider'. At the mention of his brother, Sally is more open and expressive in the communication and communicates in a more fluid manner. For example, her second post features a range of communicative symbols and emotional constructions ('no way!!! lol. i don't remember seein him since school'). The use of 'lol' and the number of exclamation marks increases the emotional content and instils a higher sense of relational connectivity between the two people.

In the concluding aspects of Sally's post there is an attempt to rebuild the perceived distance in the communication that is caused by her failure to reply to the first four posts. Sally confesses that her 'memory aint to good atm [at the moment]' and performs a plausible reason for her lack of communication. This shows Sally orientating towards the pressure to communicate that was built-up in the collective appreciation of her unanswered wall posts. The final aspect of this conversation serves

as a public response to the mediated community. Again, Dave inaccurately responds to this performance as a genuine attempt to forge a connection and produces a quick response that aims to develop the conversation further.

Celia Lury (1997) notices how the introduction of new connections leads to an 'interiority without intimacy'. Here, an increased level of interiority is greeted with a concurrent amount of detachment. There appears to be evidence of this phenomenon in the interaction between Dave and Sally. For example, take Sally's increased level of communication with Dave that is rooted in asking questions about his situation that tactfully avoids disclosing any personal depth - 'which gym?i know a few ppl that use nik naylors'. Interiority without intimacy is a way of characterising the experience of forming and re-forming relations in MySpace. Middleton and Brown (2005: 193) note, speaking on the concept of communication as a whole, 'a form of closeness is available at the cost of simultaneous distancing'.

In Extract 2 there is a sense that within the movement which brings the two speakers together there is an equal force that instilling a sense of detachment. Once Dave manages to make contact with Sally their communication initially appears to blossom only to find that the communication is later reverted back to a peripheral-like status. This echoes the theme in Extract 1 where the slight possibility of the trip was always greeted with another reason to refine and separate the MySpace relation. One possibility is that the mediated presence of the community looms so large over the communication that any signs of genuine connection are carefully managed and negotiated. There is the duel experience of constituting the self in the wall posts that explores relational connections while simultaneously providing a feeling of distance. The following extract will further explore the two-post phenomenon and the notion of interiority without intimacy in more detail.

Ani-24	Apr 2 2007 11:21A
	Kiiiii!! heya! what's up? it's been too long you know, way too long! hope everything is good... i'm back in sweden for a few days and then i'm coming to oneonta! i'm excited!! anyways i'll be back later to terrorize you.. take care!

Ani-24	Apr 2 2007 11:21A
	oh by the way...i like the song you got on ur page... =)

The first post in Extract 3 shows that Ani-24 performs a high expectation of an upcoming trip to see Ki. This can be seen in the exhaustive use of exclamation marks and the extension of Ki's name (which is typically read as if it is being shouted in netspeak terms). It is also noteworthy that this is the second extract to be organised around the possibility of an upcoming trip. In an initial attempt to recognise the relationship between Ani-24 and Ki the use of the term 'terrorize' seems to perform their relational connection through an existing discourse. The use of the term terrorize constitutes the category of insider that was recognised in the previous extract. Even though the two parties clearly have an offline connection, the communication follows the same initial practice of using the two-post phenomenon to begin a phase of communication. Ani-24 delivers two posts in quick succession to Ki's page and the second post refers to another part of the MySpace page in a way that would encourage a reaction ('oh by the way...i like the song you got on ur page...'). Ani-24 uses a separate part of the MySpace page to increase the relational connection between the

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two people. The performance of visiting Ki's profile page is able to situate their friendship in MySpace.

Ani-24 and Ki construct their relational connection through a performance of their offline activities. This produces a different set of practices in the performance of identity category of insider. This may still involve use of the two-post phenomenon (as can be seen in the first two posts from Ani-24) as this practice appears to have the same social function for those who have offline connections, it is effectively asking 'what relationship can we have in this space?' Even though a user might have an offline connection, this needs to be mediated through a different set of practices in MySpace. The practice of initiating and defining relational connections through the social practices in MySpace produces the self as being an insider. Consider the following post in the sequence from Ki to Ani-24:

Ki	**Apr 3 2007 2:36P**
	i heard u are coming to visit soon, thats really nice, i am going to be 21 so we can go out together hahalol i cannt wait to see you!!!

The above post shows that Ki is aware of Ani-24's impending visit to which he adds 'I am going to be 21 so we can go out together'. The use of 'hahalol' (persuadably a combination of haha and lol) increases the 'stake inoculation' in the discourse (Potter, 1996). The use of this discursive strategy performs a constitution of relational connection through staking a claim to the friendship – '*we* can go out together'. It also uses the upcoming trip as a way of bolstering that claim ('I cannt wait to see you!!!'). The next turn in the conversation appears two days later as is again from Ki. This use of the post is more direct and shows the capability to use the second post in a two-post phenomenon as a way of orientating to direct issues.

Ki	**Apr 5 2007 12:36P**
	where are u? now

The above posts shows that even with the closeness that is constructed in their talk they do not have a regular contact. This again shows the negotiation of relational connections is a common practice amongst MySpace users. The second post shows that Ki is not completely aware of Ani-24's location and simply reads 'where u?now'. This post is lexically different to 'where are you now?' (which could be interpreted as a call to account in a fairly generic way) and the 'u?now' performs a construction that is almost overly keen to learn Ani-24's whereabouts. And, if the time signatures are correct, Ki is provided with a response in only a few hours.

Ani-24	**Apr 5 2007 2:37P**
	still home in sweden...well until tomorrow morning and then i'm off to the states...staying with erin for the weekend and then it's suco time.. woohoo!

In this post Ani-24 responds to Ki's question regarding her upcoming travel arrangements. Ani-24 finishes the message by expressing her own performance of excitement with 'suco time…woohoo'. The reference of Ani-24's friend 'erin' marks a known acquaintance that performs a shared relation. This strengthens their connection (Ani-24 and Ki) with the performance of a mutual friendship. The following post marks a considerable change in the construction of the relational connection. The wall post is from Ani-24 is on returning home after the trip. Here, the experience of the trip is mediated in a particular way.

| Ani-24 | **Apr 17 2007 6:57A** |
| | so back in sweden...sorry i didn't say bye but i left kind of in a hurry due to the storm coming in! but i had a really good time and it was soooooo nice to see you again! stay in touch love! talk to you later. *hugs* |

In this post Ani-24 is orientating towards her potential accountability of not having done the 'actual' partying well. This relates to the prior constitution of their relation in MySpace as being entirely positive. This post is mediating the experience of the trip in a way that re-negotiates the self. From the start of this post it is clear that this is not an entirely easy process due to the time that has passed since the trip ('so back in Sweden'). The complexity of the mediation appears to be further developed in the use of the line 'sorry i didn't say bye but i left kind of in a hurry due to the storm coming in!' Having not had the experience that would justify the earlier construction of excitement, the performance is being constructed as outside of her control (evidenced with the narrative of the 'storm coming in'). Again, the relational connection is built-up through the use of the post, for example, Ani-24 writes '[it was] sooooooo nice to see you' and that she had a 'really good time'. The message is also finished with an affectionate form of closing (*hugs*). This shows that the relational connections in MySpace are subject to the mediation of other forms of interaction. Consider Ki's reply to this post:

| Ki | **Apr 19 2007 10:04P** |
| | its alright i am sorry i was kinda so out of it anyways, how;s ur trip back home. I wish i can visit you but i am poor hahalol as u know. keep in touch alright miss u and love you |

From Ki's reply we learn that the trip was not a complete success from his perspective either - 'sorry i was kinda so out of it anyways'. This shows that they both use the wall as a space to reconstruct their actions during the trip. Also, there is a more pragmatic use of the discourse in the way that Ki describes the reason for no further upcoming trips as he writes 'I wish I can visit you but I am poor haahlol as you know'. The message ends with a performance of sincerity as Ki writes 'keep in touch alright miss u and love you'. This sentiment is unlike that which we have seen in the two previous examples and performs a process of fixing-up the experience from the trip and re-establishing the relational connection between the two. This is necessary as it from this position that they gain the ability to perform the self as an insider. Ani-24 answers the question about her trip home in this final post:

Ani-24	Apr 20 2007 12:52A
	the trip home wasn't too bad at all actually...didn't sleep at all but that's okay! haven't done much while i've been home, should work on an assignment but can't really get myself to do it you know... anyways love you and miss you too! ttyl <3

The above post is dedicated to re-constituting their relationship in MySpace. The interactional link between travelling home and "doing assignments" are sustainable aspects in their ongoing communication. Ani-24 mimics Ki construction of sincerity with the line 'love you and miss you too!' This shows that Ki and Ani-24 are keen to re-establish their positive MySpace connection. As with Extract 2, the two-post phenomenon is found to be related to the ability to reposition a relational connection in MySpace. Moreover, an offline set of relations calls for a different practice of managing the position of insider as part of the on-going mediation of the self in MySpace. In this extract, Ani-24 and Ki are able to re-cast their MySpace relations in order to reduce any potential accountability from the negative interpretations from the trip. This can be clearly seen in the last section of the extract, after the visit, where there is an increased sense of sincerity in the construction of the wall posts.

This raises an opportunity to further support the issue of 'intimacy without interiority' (Lury, 1997). This theory explains the experience of distance that is felt in the construction of the self through relational connections. In Extract 3, even though Ani-24 and Ki have a relationship that develops from an offline space, they are similarly committed to negotiating their friendship in MySpace. This has practical implications that could be seen in the distance between the excitement of the trip and the actual experience. It is through MySpace that they were able to collectively modify the experience of the trip ('kinda out of it anyways'). Therefore, in MySpace, offline experiences have to be accounted for in the mediation of the self and the sense of closeness and distance is mediated though the wall posts in a way that interjects with other modes of experience.

Many relations remain interactionally at the periphery, not because they do not construct the appearance of being an insider, but because the cost of closeness comes with an equal experience of distance. The relations in MySpace are constantly changing, such is the nature of the mediated community, and so the experience is continually being negotiated and re-negotiated. In these situations there is a large amount of interiority without intimacy. This shows the way that self is shaped by the use of these particular practices. The notion of interiority without intimacy is an unexpected response to the practice of constituting the self through the relations with others. MySpace users construct the self through the interactions with others. The impact of a reduced level of intimacy is the experience of attempting to construct the self at a level of distance. The experience of the relational connection is a way of 'making sense of oneself' (Butler, 2005). As users connects and re-connect with other users they are making sense of who they are (and who they can be) in MySpace.

The two-post phenomenon is a social function that negotiates the success of the interaction and the shared presence of the mediated community. This shows that attention to the self will aid the flow of relations through the implications of the imagined element of the mediated community. It is because the community is 'just there' that these practices are necessary to constitute the self as part of a particular community. This will carry a set of identity claims that relate to that community. Wall communication in MySpace allows users to constitute the self through the relational connections with other users. Each of these constructions would then be part of an overlapping, multitude of performances where there are different constructions at play.

8.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter features the analysis of three separate extracts of data. Extract 1 demonstrates the subtle ways that MySpace users are able to jointly construct the self in MySpace communication. In this example, the communication centred on the possibility of a trip and managed to constitute the self in the conversation. This shows that every communicative action has the potential to shape the direction of the self in MySpace. The discursive use of the wall posts served as a way of negotiating and re-negotiating the self in action. The construction of the self is managed and organised at a collective level of interaction.

Extract 2 (Dave and Sally) exemplifies the use of the two-post phenomenon - a social practice that uses two consecutive posts to increase the likelihood of a response from another MySpace user. The two-post phenomenon combines with other constructions in language to produce the category of insider. Dave and Sally were able to constitute the category of insider through the discursive performances of offline connections (namely Dave's Brother). Therefore, the self in MySpace is managed through the ability to invoke a certain sets of relations and mediate a performance of the self. This extract also raises the possibility of inherent level of distance that is communicated with a formation of closeness in the MySpace interaction. This built on the work of Lury (1997) where a sense of interiority automatically limits intimacy.

Extract 3 shows further evidence of the two-post phenomenon and a similar construction of the self as the previous extracts. However, in this exchange the performance mediated a potential amount of distance that had occurred from an offline interaction. In this exchange, Ani-24 and Ki perform the ability to re-negotiate the offline experience through the mediation of the communication in MySpace. In forming this connection, the two users are able to construct a desired version of the experience through the communication in the wall. In this extract the communication also shows an equal level of closeness and distance. This notion explains how the self is not entirely open to the possibility of closeness due to an equal amount of distance that is created in each exchange. This chapter shows that the ongoing attempt to invoke communication (through the practices like the two-post phenomenon) is interactionally bound with an experience of being kept at an interactional periphery.

Chapter 9:

Identity and Place in Wall Posts

9.1 Introduction

This chapter is fundamentally about the topic of identity and continues to analyse communication from the wall section of the profile. The analysis will focus on the symbolic use of language in the wall and will aim to further develop how identity is constituted through relational connections in MySpace. This will ground the notion of identity in the interactional use of *place*. In the previous chapter the use place was present in the discourse and had clear implications for supplying a way of constructing the self. For example, Extract 1 identified the importance of 'Kernow' and Extract 2 constructed the communication through the on-going reference to 'the gym'. What is the implication of this use of place? How does this work to constitute identity in MySpace? Each of these questions will require analysis of the use of place in MySpace communication.

Place has immediate ties with the conception of space. Identity is constituted in the performance of a spatial identity. This is of particular importance when we look at the use of mediated communication in MySpace. The reference of geographical space as there is no physical sense of space underwriting the community. To some this means that online communities are no real space at all. As a mediated community, MySpace replicates a shared sense of space that is communicated amongst each of the members. What this chapter aims to show is that this is not in some way a cognitive function but a symbolic resource that is grounded in a particular use of place in language practices. This means asking how existing symbolic and discursive resources are deployed by the community to define and create shared sense of belonging with respect to a real or imagined space.

In the previous chapter the extracts showed a difference between relations that were primarily managed through MySpace itself and those where there was evidence of an offline connection. This offline connection mediates a relation where there is a geographical space about which the community members have a shared experience.

However, for those who solely communicate through MySpace, the concept of place is worked up entirely interactionally (as in Extract 2). Perhaps, more commonly, it may involve some mixture of both of these positions that explains the experience of using MySpace. Interestingly, a great many between users of MySpace and related sites fall into this category. Users tend to have some knowledge of those other with whom they interact most both online and offline, with the results that the claims they wish to make about geographical place and its relationship to the community can be called into account.

The following analysis will focus on two on two themes: (1) Grounding online exchanges in a shared experience of place and (2) Negotiating relational identities. The extracts will be analysed in a sequential order (as with the extracts in Chapter 1) to focus on the data in sequence.

9.2 Shared Experience of Place

Dixon and Durrheim (2003) are concerned with explicating the relationship between collectivities and the social spaces they inhabit. In this context, place is typically overlooked in the theorising of culture, society and groups. Dixon and Durrheim (2000) argue that 'place-identity' can function on a variety of different socio-spatial scales, which can range from household identity to national scales of identity. The boundaries that are created in these different forms of socio-spaces provide a symbolic resource in the construction of identity. They argue that identities are discursively formulated – that is, they are sets of claims and self-descriptions that people adopt (and sometime dispose of) in the course of everyday interaction. In this first extract the data will begin to explore the issue of place in the construction of identity in MySpace.

The first extract is taken from a conversation between John and Rebecca. It demonstrates how past experience of a particular place are discursively mobilised in order to ground present constructions of identity. In the following extract the data has been stripped of the surrounding information and has been presented in a style that is characteristic of discursive psychology.

1. John-5/21/2006 1:51 PM

2. rebecca!! hows kent? quite bored here now been in the computer

3. labs4 hours now coz de vin-thingy sold out bored bored very bored

4. i think i need some whisky or somethink speak 2 ya soon u crazy

5. hardcore party animal!x

6. John-5/22/2006 9:31 AM

7. ok who left the rank stuff in the kelloggs crunchy nut bowl in the

8. fridge and then try to cover it up with some tin foil. It

9. obviously had been there a while coz it had a layer of white

10. fluffy mould covering the top of what every it was it smelt so

11. bad i nerly chundered, not quite as bad a big andrews salad but

12. still not cool. lol

13. Rebecca-6/4/2006 3:55 PM

14. i'm meeting brenda on wednesday in london! how werid is that!

15. also had a dream about the flat and u and little anthony were in

16. my dream and the flat was a disaster, everything was soo ugly

17. and there was crappy cartoon/animal wall paper all over the

18. joint. we were off to complain and then i woke up. i wonder if we

19. did her in.

20. u heading down to london any time soon? u had sun too? had it

21. over the weekend and i had a little tan! beats sunbathing outside

22. halls! this sun lasts for more than ten minutes!xxx

23. Rebecca-6/8/2006 8:19 AM

24. HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!xxxxxxx

25. careful on the old whiskey! wink winkxxxxx

26. Rebecca-6/14/2006 3:44 AM

27. i had another dream about our flat. this time the deco was a bit

28. better. that woman makes me nervous as to what "her" standards of

29. taste are. u partying hard mister john? thinking about an outing

30. on sat. ohhh how was alton?xxxxxxxxxxx

31. John-6/16/2006 4:02 AM
32. Of course i am party hard! every1 seems 2 be having house parties
33. which is great coz it doesnt cost me a thing! alton was rea;;y gd
34. and the ppl that just happened 2 b there on the same day just
35. made the whole day a lot more interesting. I had a dodgy dream
36. about the house well not really our flat, the three of us were
37. walking 2wards ur place when 1 of the other house on princess st
38. blew up but it didnt effect ur place so it ok. I talked to a few
39. ppl about employment as well yesterday so soon i might actually
40. start working which will suck coz i'll end up missing the wolrd
41. cup aaagggggh!! take it easy speak 2 u soon.x

Extract 4 shows John initiating a conversation by asking 'hows Kent?'(line 2). From this first turn, it is apparent that John is acknowledging and making relevant the geographical separation between him and Rebecca. The diexis of this term implies a context between the two people where the use of 'kent' is *proximal* to John's location. Significantly, Johns follows the statement with 'been in the computer labs 4 hours' (line 3). This statement is more specific and implies that both parties have some prior experience of 'the computer labs'. There is an interesting contrast between the two relatively different geographical formulations which are invoked to the same purpose - the comparatively large scale 'Kent' to the small, specific 'computer labs'. By using the relatively flexible formulation 'Kent', John is offering Rebecca a fairly wide latitude of possible responses (i.e. there are a great many activities that might be reasonably represented as bound by 'Kent'). But the use of phrase 'the computer labs' is far more specific and carries with it the suggestion of a far narrower set of activities. Moreover, the immediate tag of a justification ('coz de vin-thingy sold out') constructs a shared awareness and experience of just what it means to be in 'the computer labs' (i.e. 'bored bored very bored').

Doreen Massey recognises this phenomenon as using the experience of place as a 'product of interaction' (1998:122). That is, rather than seeing 'place' as simply reducible to some form of geographical location, place is seen as a way of foregrounding communication. John is then appealing to this shared sense of what

has previously occurred in 'the computer labs' as a way of instigating a conversation with Rebecca. The shared knowledge of place then provides for a possible interactional opening in the present, despite lack of immediate physical proximity. But this opening does not seem, by itself, to secure adequate grounds for interaction, since John goes on to mobilise another category - 'u crazy hardcore party animal' (line 3). This is what is usually referred to as a membership category device (MCD) (Sacks, 1992). It is a category which comes ready-packaged with a clear set of putative behavioural ascriptions (for example, a 'hardcore party animal' might be expected to engage in binge-drinking, excessive socialising etc).

The invocation of this MCD might be doing various forms of interactional work. For example, it might serve as a bridge to the earlier appeal to shared experience, where Rebecca is a 'hard core party animal' and their shared experience might serve to jointly locate John in the same category (John appears to be pushing towards this in his claim to be needing 'some whisky or somethink'). This would, in turn, resolve the dilemma of why John feels it is noteworthy to report his 'bored bored very bored' state.

If, following Dixon and Durrheim (2000), identity is considered to be grounded in place, then it follows that the 'party animal' description is tapping into a past experiences of what it meant to be a part of the community who frequented the computer labs. Dixon and Durrheim also contend that there is a tendency within place-identity formulations to offer a 'nostalgic conception of place now vs. place then' (2000: 36). Whilst it would be stretching matters to say that such a short post could be characterised as nostalgic, the geographical remoteness of Rebecca the 'crazy hardcore party animal' makes for a strong contrast between the description of the present boredom and the category implications associated with the past.

There are further examples of the use of past experience in extract one through the use of 'the flat' (line 15) as a way of using place to bridge the gap between online and offline exchanges. As opposed to the 'party animal' example, 'the flat' makes a more nuanced appeal to the past. The first mention of 'the flat' is surrounded by negative implications; 'had a dream about the flat and you and little Andrew where in my dream and the flat was a disaster, everything was so ugly and there was crappy cartoon/animal wall paper all over the joint' (line 16-18). Throughout this turn, Rebecca offers an account of a 'dream' that nevertheless is situated in a shared experience of place. We might see that the potential relevancy of reporting an

otherwise irrelevant dream in this way is that it displays not merely that Rebecca still thinks about her past relationships, but that the shared past with John (and 'little anthony') enters into the relative intimacy of her dream-life.

Rebecca's turn in lines 16-18 is marked by its use of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986), such as 'disaster' and 'so ugly' which serve to build up the extremity of the account. The use of extreme case formulations in Rebecca's dream sequence communicates an ongoing interest in 'the flat' to the mediated community. Both cases of the 'party animal' and 'the flat' represent a range of sentiment implied through the discursive construction of place in mediated communities. The online exchanges use a tactfully constructed discourse that seems to communicate to a wider audience through the experience of offline exchanges.

In the latter part of Extract 4, Rebecca leaves three presumably unanswered messages in relative quick succession (line 42-44, line 45-50 and line 51-60). This shows evidence further evidence of the two-post phenomenon and the practice of leaving more than one post to signal the performance of the increased desire to communicate. In the third of the messages the dream scenario is revisited which contains a reference to 'that woman' (line 28), presumably the landlady/owner of the flat, with a disparaging remark about 'her' standards of taste. We can read this remark as an attempt to 'populate' the shared past with other memorable persons who can be the subject of joint recollection. In recalling the landlady and her awful taste in décor, Rebecca invites John (and others who may be reading their public posts to one another) to affirm their shared evaluations and values.

Dixon and Durrheim (2000) refer to such population of the past as 'locatedness'. Rebecca follows the talk about 'her' with 'u partying hard mister john?' (line 29). This echoes the earlier nostalgic conception of a 'crazy hardcore party animal' (line 3). The term 'mister john' represents an affectionate use of a formal term of address (also seen in extract 2 with 'sir' and 'miss'). Using this affectionate term demonstrates sensitivity to how the offline relationship is discursively organised. This requires managing the relationships between different members, for example, John replies to Rebecca's question 'u partying hard mister john?'(line 29) with 'Of course I am partying hard!'(line 31). This immediately attends to the nostalgic conception of 'party animals' with which Rebecca is known to be a part. It shows that the category of 'partying' is used to repeated effect throughout their online exchanges and is built into the discursive construction of their past experience of place.

The last few posts are interesting because they demonstrate a change in the footing of the interaction. For example, Rebecca refers to the flat in two ways: 'the flat' (line 15) and 'our flat' (line 27). This means that as John came to reply to these messages there was the lexical choice of 'our' or 'the' in describing the flat that offered different levels of social commitment. Goffman (1979) argues a change in footing in the interaction can work to personalise or generalise a statement. In the case of 'flat', we have a generalising version in line 15 'the flat' which becomes personalised in line 27 with the use of 'our flat'. John manages this transition with 'had a dodgy dream about the house well not really our flat'. The satisfies Rebecca's stake in the conversation by referring to the flat as 'our flat' and replies with a closely mirrored account that demonstrates comparatively similar sensitivity to the transition by combining the use of a dream scenario through the distance of 'the house'. It seems that the continuing success of the online exchanges relies heavily on the ability to negotiate the displayed identity to the wider audience, while all the time attending to the subtle issues in personal offline relationships.

9.3 Negotiating Relational Identities

In Extract 4, Rebecca produced three turns in the exchange without a reply, and the analysis noted the delicacy involved in managing this as an issue. As conversation analysis demonstrates, when we ask a question, we expect an answer (see 'adjacency pairs' Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). The following extract shows what happens when this perceived duality of the relationship is not reciprocated and the strategies that participants use to manage their accountability in the case of non-response (cf. invocation of 'flat' in Extract 4). In this extract Henry and Cheryl are discussing a package that Henry has recently posted to Cheryl.

Extract 5. Wall post conversation between Henry and Cheryl

1. Henry-6/26/2006 7:21 AM
2. Hey miss, we haven't spoken in a while. I sent you a letter today
3. with your birthday card and a few other things you might like.
4. Hope you've been well and I'll see you mid-July when I move in to
5. my new flat.
6. Miss you lots by the way. Island life would be so much fun if I

7. had some of my friends over here.

8. Cheryl-6/26/2006 8:16 AM
9. helloo. indeed it has been a long time sir. ooh i love letters. i
10. am too excited. och, remember when i was going to come to your
11. island? how would one go about doing such a thing anyway? oh yes
12. mid july and the flat warming festivities shall begin oui? i look
13. forward to present buying! have you spoken to Claire etc much
14. since you've been home? damn it i have to get changed out of my
15. pyjamas. it is 4:15pm. disgraceful. talk t'you soon.

16. Henry-6/26/2006 5:16 PM
17. Yup, when I return the festivities shall begin. Only little
18. festivities though since I am not very rich at the moment, not at
19. all really. You can bring your red washing basket. That stuck in
20. my memory for some reason. When you said "pirat ship" there
21. must've gone off a little childhood pirate trigger or
22. something... yes... Ok, well I hope you enjoy your letter. I
23. haven't gotten in touch with Claire for a little while but last
24. I heard she's been having a really really good time and loves the
25. atmosphere in Taiwan. I wish I was there actually but I have to
26. earn some money before I do any adventuring... Well, shall speak
27. to you soon miss...

28. Henry-6/26/2006 5:18 PM
29. I've taken to calling you "miss" all of a sudden. I hope this
30. doesn't prove to be a problem...

31. Cheryl-6/27/2006 7:02 AM
32. heh it shouldn't be a problem, nope. well i look forward to the
33. small festivities. my red washing basket may come with, je ne
34. sais pas. i best be off to clean before work. fun times. take
35. care sir.

36. Henry-6/27/2006 7:15 AM

37. Cool, I can't wait to be do something in Aberdeen. I'm a bit

38. bored see and I've taken to buying things. I have too much of an

39. overdraft now and will probably be living off of beans all

40. summer. Oh I got a new laptop. Well, not new but it's really

41. cool. I'm selling my old computer because it's too big. Plus,

42. laptops are much better for just carrying around and for music

43. and the likes.

44. Henry-6/28/2006 1:19 AM

45. I just had a strange dream where there was this girl and lots of

46. lego and this man who kept on saying "je ne ce pas". Hmm, I wish

47. my imagination would at least make this make sense...

48. Henry-6/29/2006 12:01 PM

49. I'm going to type a lot. I know this because I've typed

50. approximately six thousand words today at my leisure. So don't

51. blame me if you're tired...

52. I tried being sad today by listening to Idlewild's

53. Warnings/Promises then I got to the end and ended up happier than

54. ever. It seems that it's difficult to be sad when really you

55. aren't. I got my laptop today so I've just been installing things

56. on that an revelling in the fact that I can carry my computer.

57. Really, I can. It's only a couple of kilos as opposed to my

58. mammoth ex-computer. Crap, I typed that on the ex-computer which

59. is the only thing I can use the internet with just now. Do you

60. think it'll mind? I don't want dying on me before I go to sell

61. it... Gosh, I anticipate it'll die of a heart attack or processor

62. meltdown or whatever. You wanna tell me what you think of my new

63. reviews? Nobody ever tells me, that's why I'm going to print them

64. out and force them on people when I start to pamphlet about anti-

65. nuclear action. Oh yes, do you want to join me? It'll be a good

66. Sunday hobby and it'll make you feel good... I just got kind of

67. motivated to do something like that after listening to

68. Radiohead's Hail to the Thief today. Oh, you should read my
69. review. I really like that one. I've meant to write about that cd
70. for months now. Anyway, did you get my parcel? I don't know if I
71. put either too many or too few stamps on it. I'm not very clever
72. in terms of doing practical things. Anyway, I'll abandon this
73. absurd paragraph...
74. Hope you're doing well over there. I am happy today because I
75. finally started doing reviews again. I hope I do a good many
76. during the summertime.

77. Cheryl-6/30/2006 4:12 AM
78. haha those comments were hilarious. i especially liked the one
79. about the dream, how bizarre. i got your package on wednesday. it
80. made me smile a lot. thanks. i'm in the middle of writing you
81. back and trying to think of things to send you. my mind is a bit
82. of a blank at the moment though so it may take some time. i
83. watched thumbsucker - i remember you said you saw it - it was
84. excellent. i really enjoyed it but it was weird. can you send me
85. a message with your address in it, your writing gets a bit hard
86. to read near the end! heh oh how d'you spell your last name as
87. well....do...something or other. je ne sais pas. well i best be
88. getting ready for the day. lookng forward to seeing all you guys
89. again. i got a postcard from claire. it looks so nice there! how
90. jealous am i. sigh. anyway i will talk to you soon. hope you're
91. doing well over on that there island.

Extract 5 begins with a turn from Henry where he addresses Cheryl as 'hey miss' (line 2). The first reply from Cheryl mirrors Henry's formal term of address 'indeed it has been a long time sir' (line 9). By providing the opposite expression to the term 'miss', as in 'sir', the two speakers are connected in a seemingly affectionate formality (cf. Extract 4 'Mister John'). However, for John this term of address is delicately used to discursively manage the transition between online and offline. Henry then asks Cheryl, "I've taken to calling you 'miss' all of a sudden. I hope this doesn't prove to be a problem…"(line 29/30). The fact that this is included in a separate message

seems to give the question a serious tone that Cheryl orients towards in her reply, 'heh it shouldn't be a problem, nope' (line 32). This suggests that even in the early exchanges of an online exchange the negotiation of the offline relationship is at the forefront of interactional business. The final use of the term 'sir' (line 35) is another example of Cheryl mirroring Henry's language, and demonstrates her acceptance of his term of address and subsequent questioning of it in line 29/30.

As extract 5 continues, Henry peppers his posting with formulations which appear designed to convey a sense of emotional depth and complexity, as provided for by statements such as, 'its difficult to be sad when you really aren't'(line 54). One possible reason for this construction of a 'sensitive' identity is the management of a pressing interpersonal concern, 'did you get the parcel?'(line 70). The discourse is organised to disguise the interpersonal concern of the parcel, whilst maintaining a displayed identity of the relationship with Cheryl and the known social relationships between Henry and Cheryl. It is clear that the negotiation of personal concerns is conducted subtly through the discourse, while continually attending to the displayed identity the discourse is promoting the mediated community. This means that to have clarified one's position in a mediated community is not enough to determine an ability to avoid accountability for a range of issues. To that end the ongoing negotiation of personal interaction is cautiously constructed in a wider 'social' sense of online exchanges.

As was noted in Extract 4 with Rebecca's three turns, in the absence of a reply, tricky interactional work has to be done to fix-up the appreciation of the wider mediated community. This is due to the nature of the two-post phenomenon. In extract 5, there are three sets of messages from Henry that do not immediately elicit a response. Henry has also not received confirmation that his parcel has arrived. The first (lines 37-43) concerns what he wants to do when he returns from his current place 'the island'. The second (lines 44-47) is constructed as a dream sequence and with his use of 'je ne ce pas' (line 46) mirroring and presumably directly indexing Cheryl's' use of the same phrase in line 33, suggesting that the girl he dreamt about is Cheryl. After no response, his third message begins with an immediate account for his continued correspondence 'I'm going to type a lot. I know this because………' (line 49). He then proceeds to give an account of his recent activities, in this case purchasing a new computer. After this perhaps deliberately mundane account, he asks

Cheryl a specific question 'you wanna tell me what you think of my new reviews?' (line 63).

Henry here uses a circuitous approach, where the delicate business of asking for direct evaluation of his own work is embedded in a prolonged discussion of other 'safer' matters, such that any 'off-line' implications of such a request are downgraded. This is shown in the following lines when Henry invites Cheryl to share in a joint activity offline; 'Nobody ever tells me what they think, that's why I'm going to start printing them out and force them on people when I start to pamphlet about nuclear action. Oh yes, do you wan to join me?' (line 65), and then a reason for her to do so 'it'll be a good Sunday hobby and it'll make you feel good' (lines 66).

The final bit of business done in the last turn (and arguably his first reason for writing) is a renewed request for confirmation of receipt of his parcel. As it is regarded as common courtesy to register acceptance of such things, Cheryl's failure to adhere to this normative procedure creates some interactional difficulty. Henry immediately mitigates his question by the following 'I don't know if I put either too many or too few stamps on it. I'm not very clever in terms of doing practical things' (line 71). This attempts to downgrade any implied emotional investment in the request. Henry's relational identity to Cheryl is negotiated between different contextual situations to conceal the attempt to achieve concerns of a personal nature. The problem Henry faces is how online exchanges keeps offline relationships inherently locked in a transitional stage of constant negotiation.

It is now interesting to consider Cheryl's reply, which attempts to answer the questions posed to her with the formulation "haha those comments were hilarious" (line 78). Cheryl continues, 'I got your package on Wednesday. It made me smile a lot. thanks.' (line 79). She also accounts for her lack of a response in the meantime, 'I'm in the middle of writing you back and trying to think of things to send you. My mind is a bit blank at the mo so it may take some time.'(line 80). The term 'a bit blank' serves two important discursive functions: Firstly, it acts a 'softener' for the apparent lack of an accountably accurate description (see Edwards, 2000) and secondly, it deploys a set of mental terms related to memory (see Locke & Edwards, 2003) which serve to render action as non-intentional (in a similar way that Sally 'forgets things atm [at the moment]' from the previous chapter). For example, in terms of writing her reply she explains the delay as her mind is " a bit blank" (line

82), but a few moments later Cheryl remarks on a film they have both mentioned as, " I remember you said you saw it" (line 83).

What is striking about these two functions is Cheryl's distancing work from Henry. This is most poignant in line 85 where she asks for his address and again in line 86 'how do you spell your last name as well'. The prior turns, in particular from Henry, have pointed to a close relationship between the participants. However, Cheryl's displayed lack of specific (and mundane) knowledge related to Henry – his address and, more poignantly, his last name, demonstrate to the audience, that their offline relationship is perhaps not as close as Henry's prior turns have suggested.

Extract 5 shows how the subtle organisation of the discourse surrounding personal issues seems to rely on the negotiation of the relationship between online and offline. Finding a sense of locatedness in the fluid social landscape of online exchanges requires constant interactional work to be done on the particular past experience and the contextual situation in which it currently arises. In mediated communities, the attempt to represent the past experiences of many people into a variety of social situations is an omnipresent concern. This diversity is represented in the discourse as the ability to achieve personal goals while considering the displayed self to the mediated community.

9.4 Place-Identity

In Life on the Screen, Sherry Turkle (1995) describes how early adopters of the Internet were forming communities that seemed to supplant and far exceed the boundaries of their own face-to-face communities. Turkle offers up the claim her participants made that 'RL is just another window' (i.e. experience of the 'real' world does not qualitatively differ from opening up a new communicational channel on a computer) as emblematic of new forms of social experience. The unique selling point of this community is the opportunity to 'try on' new identities. From the evidence in this chapter one can reformulate Turkle's position: In online communication users are faced with the task of constructing identity in a way that requires mediating the social relations of other community members. In this sense mediation is a structural feature of both off-line and on-line communities. The question is then around the modalities through which mediation is conducted and how this resources identity.

The data shows that MySpace interaction is bound by a shared sense of place and by identity categories that are indexed to place (i.e. place-identities). This has demonstrated some of the complex interactional means by which place identities are mobilised, and how place serves as a symbolic resource for managing current social relations. In particular this has shown how a shared sense of the past is critical to establishing certain kinds of identity relevant claims, and how the off-line and the on-line can be delicately interwoven. This extends the findings of the data in the previous chapter to show how language can also function as symbolic reference to place as a way of performing a connection with a particular group identity.

Communication in MySpace is accomplished through the spatially unfolding juxtaposition of multiple modes of expression, each with quite a diverse range of consequences. What is most notable is that the boundaries between online and offline, public and private, MySpace and 'your' space, is that they all immediately dissolve at the moment of communication. The use of place is able to carve-out a space that belongs to a particular group. In invoking certain places individuals are connected to the spatialised form of identity that mediates a community membership.

This communication relies on objects in language to take on more symbolic forms. For example, the cereal bowl from Extract 4 mobilised a certain performance of the relationship between the community members. Identity is performed through orientations to a particular membership category. The cereal bowl relates to a performance of an identity that was united in the collective disapproval of the cleanliness of the bowl. This causes new variations of relational connections that do not render any spaces, places or objects within a static materiality. The multiplicity of identity formations in MySpace is constituted through the performance of a range of different claims. MySpace users are able to experience this multiplicity while all the time grounding their identity in place and space.

9.5 Chapter Summary

Every member of a group is able to invoke their own experience of the flat, the pub or any other social setting that carries with it a feeling of group membership. Both extracts in this chapter show how the construction of identity is intertwined with the symbolic resource of place. The use of place is able to position oneself as a member of that group. Just as the users in the previous chapter constructed the category of

insider through the use of different relations, the members in this chapter position themselves through a shared experience of place.

The formation of identity in MySpace relies on the claims from a number of overlapping sources. Identity is continually changing through the collective performance of the group. As each member develops a place-identity through different conversations the individual connection with this identity is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated. The use of place-identities forms a way of accounting for their current *locatedness* within a group identity. Place-identities have the duel capacity for constituting and performing identity through the collective mediation of the identity construction.

Place-identities offer a symbolic foundation for production of identity in MySpace. In experimenting with new ways of formulating identity, users are able to connect with a group identity in a way that mediates the experience of the community as a whole. This would be part of a multiple set of performances that MySpace users could orientate towards. Identity is then *spatialised* as MySpace users have to act into that space to produce place-identities. Consequently, this has the impact of reflecting back on the way that identity can be produced in MySpace. In the following chapter the analysis will explore a different practice in MySpace. This will focus of the use of blogging in MySpace and the analysis will leave the confines of a purely textual presentation and begin to look at MySpace pages in their entirety. This will also encourage the opportunity to expand the current investigation of the self into wider notions of subjectivity.

Chapter 10:

The 'Brand Me' in MySpace Blogs

10.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of blogs in MySpace. Blogging is a highly popular pursuit in other locations on the Internet and is accessible to MySpace users through their profile page. The analysis in this chapter will not require linking any of the data together (as with the previous analytic chapters) and the blogs will be examined in the way that they appear on the screen. In the previous chapter, identity was found to be connected to symbolic uses of place that grounded a membership to a particular group. In this chapter the blog offers a different set of communicative practices in the construction of self and identity in MySpace. This chapter is also looking to explore beyond the everyday use of the term self and highlight some wider issues in terms of subjectivity.

Blogs have been found to have a wide appeal across large numbers of Internet users (Blood, 2002). The statistical analysis of the MySpace data showed that users will have an average of three blogs on their profile page. In 2006, a PEW Internet and American Life report showed that the most popular topic among bloggers is 'me'. This indicates that many users may use the blog to further introduce themselves to a collective, imagined audience. Many of the users keep a blog that is entitled 'about me' on their main profile page.

10.2 Self –Disclosure

Research suggests that the information in blogs constitutes something of a self disclosure (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Qian & Scott, 2007). This relates to the general findings of the Internet as space for self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001a, 2001b) and the way that MySpace users have been found to disclose personal information on their profiles (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). The first piece of data in this chapter will explore the issue of self-disclosure in the MySpace blogs. The following blog is entitled 'how good am I' and would seem to have all the immediate qualities of an 'about me' style blog.

Extract 6. Blog entitled 'How good am I?'

In Extract 6 the blog shows a different form of communication practice to the earlier analytic chapters. Many of these blogs consist of large sections of text that receive only minor replies from the rest of the community. The author of this blog, Mark, situates the content in a narrative of his recent life events. This blog is written in a conversational style that appears to be directed to a perceived mediated community. The main narrative of the blog is constructed as a response to being 'recently berated by someone'. However, the line 'recently berated by someone' features relatively late in the narrative structure and there is the sense that the blog is first concerned with a performance that refutes such a claim. The blog begins with 'sometimes I ask myself, how good am I?!?!' which sets the context for the rest of the blog as this question is followed by a construction of his relations, responsibilities and past actions.

Mark invokes different relations throughout the blog to construct an answer his recent experience of being berated. From the outset there is a strong rhetorical position of the personal, individual focus of this blog. There is also a visual link between the background of his profile photograph and the colour scheme in the blog. This implies a connection with the content in the blog and the blog author himself which is furthered by a close-up profile photograph of Mark adjacent to the blog text.

The combination of the personal account in the text and the image in the photograph performs a sense of the 'me' in the blog.

As the blog continues, Mark constructs a narrative of stress and responsibility around the realisation that he is getting older. Mark explains 'Thems the days when I feel 18 again, with no responsibility and not a care in the world...sad thing is now, I'm thirty fucking two now and I feel like I have more responsibility that Tony Bleedin' Blair'. From a conversation analytic perspective, the use of the expletive in 'Tony Bleedin' Blair' and in 'thirty fucking two' would be a typical example of an 'insertion' (Schegloff, 1996). The use of the insertion is typically recognised as a way of increasing the stake in a discursive account. In this case, it appears that the use of the expletive bolsters the claim that he has more responsibility than is necessary. There also seems to be a form of acoustic pattern to the discursive use of 'thirty fucking two' and 'Tony bleeding Blair'. Both of these devices help construct him as a person who acts responsibly.

However, there is the suggestion of a 'rhetorical dilemma' (Billig et al., 1988) in the use of 'Tony Bleedin' Blair' and 'thrity fuckin two' that extends into the next paragraph of the blog. Mark continues, 'well...maybe not, I mean, I'm hardly worried about the next press scandal that could oust me from the world I am accustomed to, but hey I'm only a Salesman, not the Prime minister'. The construction of a 'world that I am accustomed to' seems to accept the responsibility category while performing the opposite position - someone who is not 'worried about the next press scandal'. The rhetorical dilemma sets up a distinction whereby Mark's account is given extra-discursive weight and it is difficult to argue with either position.

The second paragraph of the blog begins '14 years on I ask myself how fucking useless am I'. This appears to be an immediate contradiction to the category of responsibility in the first paragraph. However, Mark once more uses this rhetorical dilemma to project his current account as one of dependability (see also Heritage, 1984). Mark invokes a number of wider identity categories to establish his accountability to those social groups. For example, he lists '[his] family, a wonderful woman in me life, me sister'. His sister is of particular importance as she has her own category that is not simply located in that of 'family'. This may be due to her presence in the imagined community. This construction enables the blog author to invoke his responsible-identity category through the connection to a specific relational tie. This shows the way identity is achieved through the subtle negotiation of discourse

practices. The experience is then located in the relation to these identity positions. Mark's construction of identity is through a category of responsibility that performs a positive relationship with his family and friends.

Mark not only raises his connection with the different identity categories (work, family etc.) but he goes on to clarify his position within these groups, again, by first constructing the difficulties he has with continuing such relations ('the fact that I'm no longer the Socialite that I'm used to being'). From this position the blog performs a construction of 'maturity' and of 'getting older'. The blog continues, 'what with the focus I have lavished on my career, it all seems like I've not the chance to pick me harras these days'. This shows a performance of gender and sexuality in the current narrative.

Performing sexuality in this blog is a further way that Mark is able to contrast his responsibility category with a performance of a different, and one would for Mark, a more humorous nature. To do this, Mark uses a performance of gender that begins in the line 'I might not show it all the time, but hey, I'm a bloke…what do you expect!' Many gender theorists argue that the subversive acts of gender differences are often positioned as an act of amusement. Lori Kendall (2002: 107) argues 'understanding that the limitations of the medium *require* performance allows online participants to interpret online gender masquerades selectively as *only* performance'. Therefore, it is the actual performance of gender inequalities as a 'joke' that enables them to continue (see also Walkerdine, 1990). It is through such performances that such masculine and feminine positions are created. The main issue is that Mark uses the performance of gender, not only as a way of building humour into his blog, but as a way of performing his masculine identity to the mediated community.

Mark continues the performance of relational connection at the beginning of the third paragraph; 'I really care about everyone that is in my life'. The gender construction in the second paragraph is met with an increased performance of sincerity at the beginning of the third. Here, the blog returns to the earlier concern of renouncing the recent experience of being 'berated'. This is once more contested by confirming his social relations and even contrasts the joke made around gender stereotypes in the 'even blokes don't understand other blokes sometimes'. Each line of the blog constructs the self through a network of identity discourses that would refute any accusations of him not being consistent.

In the introduction to this chapter, blogs were identified as a social practice that led to a high level of self-disclosure (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Qian & Scott, 2007). From the basis of this analysis, could Mark's blog be considered as a form of self-disclosure? To answer this question will require further understanding of what the term self-disclosure means in this context.

Many sources have speculated that the visual anonymity of the Internet would increase the possibility of self-disclosure (Rheingold, 1993; Wallace, 1999). A large amount of self-disclosure research is dedicated to the exploration of romantic online relationships and the positive or negative affects this might have (see Parks & Floyd, 1996). Visual anonymity is thought to be the guiding premise for disclosure in online spaces (see Joinson, 2001a; 2001b; Locke & Gilbert, 1995). This presumes that a reduced public awareness would result in an increased level of self-disclosure. A study of self-disclosure in MySpace has recently shown that parental influences impacts on the amount information younger users choose to disclose (De Souza & Dick, 2008). The notion of self-disclosure does not just relate to the practice of revealing sensitive information (such as personal information) but the decision to divulge different aspects of ourselves. Conversely, self-disclosure has also been found to present oneself in a positive light online and avoid the potential dangers of privacy invasion (Donath & boyd, 2004).

These recent findings in self-disclosure seem to suggest a simple relation between the lack of visual cues and the tendency to self-disclose does not fully grasp the nature of the phenomenon. In Extract 6, Mark does not simply present information in a way that would illustrate a lack of understanding about what he is disclosing. Furthermore, it appears that many of his decision to reveal certain pieces of information (e.g. being 'berated') have a wider social presence. It seems that there is more that could be said about the way that Mark is revealing information. There is a *use* of the self-disclosure that is overlooked in the previously explanations. It is not just about the exact information that the user is presenting but the drive towards a sense of closeness that is achieved through the outcome of the disclosure.

Perhaps, the definition of self-disclosure could be advanced to include the social action of the disclosure. For example, Mark's blog is constructed towards countering his recent experience of being 'berated'. This form of social action is not accounted for in the self-disclosure definition. The notion of a self-disclosure seems to counter the way MySpace is positioned at a social level. The self cannot be *disclosed* as it

constituted at a social level in the first instance, and ultimately, is not for one person to disclose. There may be a more adequate way for describing the function of the blog and some have speculated that the communication in blogs is better understood as a form of 'confession' (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Viégas, 2005). From this perspective, the use of blogs is seen to represent a new form of confession that may fuller explain the social function of the blog. This analysis will now develop the notion of blogs as a confession. However, this will involve a slight twist, as the current use of the term in blogging literature will be supplemented with a classic explanation of confession. This will require an introduction of the desired definition of confession that will predominantly introduce Foucault's ideas on the subject.

10.3 Confessions

In *The Confessions*, Rousseau (1781/1999) documents his life in a way that was uncharacteristic of writing in the mid-18th century and his book paved the way for a number of other authors to rehearse their life through a divulgence of their deepest, darkest secrets. In fact, confessional writing of this kind could be extended further into the birth of Christian confession in the time of Augustine. In more recent times, as the understanding of the confession developed, the psychological implications for confession as an "act of therapy", through self-reflection, have become widely recognised as a central aspect to the psychodynamic approach. This shows that the notion of a confession has a long history that involves the ability to look inward to understand ourselves. The main theory of confession that will focus in this chapter is the approach to confession taken by Michel Foucault. This work traces the confession through history to track the relation between power and knowledge that is always at work in the process of self-reflection.

Foucault explores the way that 'unreason' (a refusal of the accepted boundaries of reason) arises when reason becomes the moral standard. Foucault (1989: 187-188) writes, 'we are dealing with an art of discourse, and of the restitution of truth, in which madness is significant as unreason'. The 'art of discourse', or the 'incitement to discourse' as it is otherwise known, shows the rise of a reasonable way that people should speak about different morals (shown most vividly by Foucault when people are talking about sex). For Foucault, this offered a new formation of the ancient cultural practice of the *confession*.

In classic theology, confession serves to connect the confessor with an authentic self image of the divine. Confession allows the person to become transparent and ultimately connect with a higher sense of being. Foucault shows how 'the truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of procedures of individualisation of power' (Foucault, 1988a: 58-59). The Christian ethic accepted that 'confession frees, but power reduces one to silence' (ibid: 60). The purpose of Foucault's work was to show that, in actual fact, power does not silence, neither does confession free, but the practices of liberation define an acceptable form of existence for the person or the society.

Foucault explains how the drive to 'know yourself' has obscured the notion of 'caring for the self' that dates back to a Greek philosophy. This has been transformed in modern, western conceptualisations of the self. For the Greeks, it was important to know who you are in terms of others and this delivered a main source of knowledge about oneself. Foucault argues that in the modern day appreciation of the self there is a tendency to 'know yourself' in a more technical, judgmental sense that was inspired by the way that people should act when they come before God (Foucault, 1988b). There was no longer an abstract notion of what it means to 'know yourself' but a more pressing ability to be able to present yourself. Knowledge of oneself minimises a principle of caring for oneself in a more abstract sense.

At many points in Foucault's work the influence of the birth of Christianity is of particular importance to development of the confession. Foucault notices how the confessional power of Christianity had a particular version of 'truth' that was enacted through the practice of the self. The introduction of Christianity brought with it a number of devices (mechanical or otherwise) which made possible the construction of a particular kind of self. Foucault (1988a: 42) states, 'it [the confession] was not a way for the sinner to explain his sins but a way to present himself as a sinner'. Foucault offers a critique of how the 'psychological-complex' created a way of 'normalising' the modern form of selfhood. For Rose (1985, 1989), following Foucault, the 'psychological-complex' draws people into speaking of themselves with reference to the liberal-humanist subject where the key values of modern capital (growth, self-reliance etc.) are dominant in the available discourse. Ian Parker has also demonstrated the existence of the 'psychological complex' in other forms of treatment including psychopathology (see Parker, 1999).

Confessions were a central part of Foucault's work during the mid-1970s through his work on *The History of Sexuality*. It is at this point that his work took a conceptual shift towards the topic of confession as Foucault argues that it is representative of a larger formation of the self as an object of knowledge. Here Foucault introduces the term the 'technology of self' to define the power relations that lie behind the arrival of different discourses of knowledge. Foucault (2000: 225) explains how the 'technology of the self' refers to a variety of functions that:

> permit individuals to effect, by their own means, or with help of others, a certain number of operations on their own body and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.

The construction of the self is then allowed 'a certain number of operations' that forms a continuous 'life work' where individuals feel empowered to transform themselves through self-reflection, through a care for the self. Confessions are a technology of the self that demonstrate a culturally accepted state of reason, one of 'wisdom, perfection or immortality'. Self-mastery is then the route to infinite wisdom or immortality and is achieved through an ongoing set of reflective practices. It is not the individual acts that one engages in that is of importance but rather the work of creating a set of consistent actions that are fashioned in an ethical orientation.

Foucault proposes a four-fold scheme in which individuals are able to form oneself as an 'ethical subject' including: the 'determination of ethical substance', 'mode of subjection', 'forms of elaboration' and 'telos of the ethical subject' (Foucault, 1987: 96). In each of these distinctions Foucault shows how the self is involved with the normalising practices of the 'psychological-complex'. The ethical subject shows how subjectivity constitutes a profound mistrust of the current self-understanding. Technology of the self is then rooted in a suspicion of knowledge and power that calls for a continual amount of self-reflection. There is then a certain 'care' for the self that constitutes subjectivity that is formed out of this need for self-reflection.

10.4 Self-Care

What does this 'care' for the self mean? How does this ethical sense of the self relate to subjectivity? It is clear that, in returning to the Greeks, Foucault certainly does not intend to revisit a humanistic conception of the self. Alternatively, Foucault comments on cultural level of discourse that perpetuates a 'care for the self' where a level of self-inspection or self-narration is the norm. The self, in this context, is not one that is clearly defined as being substantively modified in everyday practice (as with the social psychological use of the term). It is instead, the ongoing process of the subjugation of the self, where there is a focus of subjectivity. In the later parts of his career, Foucault (2000: 290-291) defined self in the following way:

> It is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same sort of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different relationship to oneself. (Foucault, 2000 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009:168)

Foucault argues that the self is not a singular 'substance' but an fluid concept that is continually moving and changing – it is a 'form'. The self is not fixed in a particular setting as it is subjectively different in each setting (shown in the example going to vote producing a different self to fulfilling ones sexual desires). It is here where the constant and prolonged examination of the self is better conceptualised as subjectivity. This level of variation is then crucial to the 'various forms' that the self takes and the connections that relate to these forms. Subjectivity refers to the lived multiplicity of each of these subject positions.

Blogs offer a distinct experience of subjectivity through the practice of self-reflection. The blogs allow for a unique opportunity to experience a form of self-care where there is the potential to construct oneself an ethical subject. This issue is apparent in the MySpace blogs as users explore the concept of 'me'. The use of term self-care is an intentional move in Foucault's work to show a capacity for

normalisation. Here, subjectivity contains the multiple aspects of what we can make of ourselves as subjects. The concept of self-care is deliberately positioned to blur the ontological difference between the subject and subjectivity. This, Foucault would argue, is part of the culturally specific ways of normalising oneself as a subject, predominantly through renouncing oneself in a confessional style discourse. The end result is a moral/ethical subjectivity that involves certain kind of self-reflecting practice (for further discussions see Brown & Stenner, 2009). The impact is that the blogs have become a modern way of performing a sense of confession through normalisation and self-care.

Confession blogs could then be seen as a form of self-care that carries an experience of being an ethical subject. For Foucault, this is part of the cautious and prolonged examination of the self and the normative capacities that push the determination of the ethical subject into a space where they can become a mode of subjection (how the individual relates to the ethical substance). The experience of this ethical subjectivity is mediated through a multiplicity of relationships. This is also the case in MySpace as users experience subjectivity through the performance of their relational connections (e.g. this is seen in Extract 6 with the connection to users in the blog). This experience is located in the performance of a multiplicity of relations. Here, the use of the term subjectivity grasps something of the wider conceptual notion of experience that is bound up with issues of normalisation and power. The following section will continue this discussion with another piece of data.

10.5 Blogging as a Confession

The notion of a confession was first introduced as an alternative explanation to a blog as a form of self-disclosure. The following data extract will explore the possibility of a blog as a confession. This will serve as an opportunity to focus on the concept of subjectivity. The will analyse the different aspects of the following blog in MySpace.

Extract 7. Peter's blog showing evidence of a confession

Extract 7 shows Peter's blog that performs a version of self-care. Peter constructs the 'boredom of working life' and a general openness to what he considers to be the 'daily toll' of everyday life. The blog begins with a narrative of Peter's recent misfortunes when he writes 'those of you who knew of my plan…Well the plan has been scuppered'. This shows a cautious examination of self that shows the active participation in a confessional style of discourse. The blog forms a practice of self-care that accesses an experience of subjectivity through relational connections. This subjectivity is 'co-constituted' through his imagined set of connections in the performance of the blog.

Peter continues this performance of self-care through the construction of the things that have happened to him, for example, 'when i lost my childhood dream job of running LABRINTH L.R.P club in April, it was the hope of joining a new (and quite likely to enjoy commercial success) band that kept me going'. From a Foucauldian perspective, this example shows the available discourse lays-down a grid of intelligibility through which Peter is able to understand his experience. Extract 7 shows that Peter's experience relates to modern discourses of growth, wealth and self-reflection.

Peter's account, using a Foucauldian scheme, shows how the experience of subjectivity is located in the practice of self-narration. Peter's blog shows how experience is made sense of through the use of self-reflection. This experience provides a route to subjectivity that, while being not of his choosing, has the capacity for realising other normative capacities. This capacity is based on the available discourse of power/knowledge. It is through the performance of self-care that Peter is able to experience himself as an ethical subject and invoke a number of discourses, and access the power of a reflective turn. This turn requires looking at himself through his relational connections in the MySpace blog.

Peter's account performs a rejection to the body of knowledge/power that is normatively available. For example, he writes in the blog 'I plod through the daily toll of life in a capitalist society, that i despise'. Peter's account is constructed with a certain amount of resistance to the normative capacities to power/knowledge. Foucauldian theories on resistance foreclose the possibility of subjectivity due to it being entirely overrun by instances of power. However, Peter's account of a self-care is able to make use of other forms of knowledge and construct a resistance to the dominant forms of power ('a capitalist society, that i despise').

Peter is constructing an access to a range of normatives which exceed the norms of a 'capitalist society' and his current experience. This can be seen in the later sections of the blog with Peter's refusal to accepted common discourses around the importance of work, for example, when he writes 'life should be defined by the work that you do for the majority of it to earn enough money to stay afloat'. This performance of a self-care is shaped to provide a capacity for realising other normatives. The experience of Peter's subjectivity is *modified* through the practice of self-care in the blog. In attending to his experience he is repositioning himself as an ethical subject that opens a new form of sociability and subjectivity.

Butler (2005) argues that the use of self-reflection allows the ability to take on the power of the situation and move beyond the current experience of subjectivity. Butler outlines the way that 'external' subject positions are a crucial part of self-refection and self-narration. To give an account of oneself requires an audience that is prepared to listen, at least in part, and has some conception of *how* to listen through a shared discourse. This describes how subjects must seek to establish a relationship to some set of normatives or power relations. This requires a shaping of normative influence through the performance of social encounters.

However, Peter does not posses this subjectivity (linked to the work of Rose, 1999) but is able to experience a mediation of a new form of subjectivity. It is through these practices that MySpace experience can be actively shaped. As Peter writes in Extract 7, 'perhaps it is time to explore a little known talent of mine since my childhood and getting into acting'. Therefore, in accepting Foucault's later ideas about self as a process, we can see how subjectivity is grounded in the discourse of power/knowledge that is open to change and movement. Peter's account is an example of the way that experience is able to align with certain alternative discourses in order to create new forms of subjectivity. Therefore, an experience of subjectivity relates to the ongoing process of self-reflection or self-care that is open to modification through the use of the blog.

Peter performs a self-narration in the blog that does not require continuation into other areas of his life (or even into the other areas of his profile). The blog creates an experience of subjectivity that is constituted in the performance of a confession. This relies on an inherent multiplicity to the formation of self-care, not the focus on a single subject, which allows for a variety of new subjectivities. One of the final paragraphs of Peter's blog begins with 'I will need a dream job to chase if I am to remain at BCUC'. This further shows the construction of self-reflection that allows for Peter to explore a different set of normatives. In this example, the self-care is constantly in motion and intersects with other forms of 'life-work' (for a further discussion of Foucault's use of this term see Brown, 2001). One way of conceptualising this process is through using a *brand* metaphor. Self-care produces a multiplicity of the 'me' in the blog where there is an ongoing process of evaluation that constitutes a new experience of subjectivity.

The *brand me* defines the continuous process of re-constituting the 'me' in the blog. The 'me' is branded across the different forms of experience and allows a way of creating new subjectivities (for a further discussion of the power of the brand see Lury, 2004). Furthermore, there is a second implication for the brand me, in the way that it contributes the unique selling point of the profile as a whole. The different aspects of the brand me then become the reason to communicate with a particular user in MySpace. The brand me provides a different experience of subjectivity that will subsequently provide a increased reason to communicate with the user. It displays to the wider community that the users has the capacity to realise new forms of

subjectivity. This would provide potential further reasons to communicate in the future.

The brand me represents the continual shifting and repositioning of subjectivity through the practice of self-care. The brand me is not located in one substance (or product) but is distributed across a multiplicity of performances that contributes to an overall experience. This is similar to the way a brand, in marketing terms, can represent the same overall image while be distributed over a range of different products. In a similar vein, the performance is continually located in the overall 'me' in the profile, but it is also able to experience different forms of subjectivity through the self-care in the blog. This is similar to the way Butler (2005) argues that the reflexive turn gives the ability to move beyond the local context of normative power.

The confessional discourse in Peter's blog is part of an experience of subjectivity, which is not explicitly of his own choosing, but is able to work through a capacity for realising certain normatives. These normatives are in a constant process of 'becoming' through the shifting relationships that allow certain aspects to be realised (Bergson, 1913/2001; Deleuze & Guattari, 1994; Massumi, 2002). The brand me explains this constant state of becoming as the act of self-care. This is part of a process of modifying the experience of subjectivity in the confessional use of the blog. In the next data extract the aim is to further explore the concept of the brand me.

10.6 Brand Me

The conceptualisation of 'me' as a brand is one which explains the multiple ways that people are able to experience a new form of subjectivity in MySpace blogs. The 'me' is an over-arching term for the multiple forms of subjectivity that have a brand-like quality. The brand me is the process of accessing different normatives through the confessional use of the blog. In the following extract 'me' as a brand is explored in terms of the shifting forms of self-care that impact on the ability to construct oneself as an ethical subject. This will follow the following a new piece of blog data.

03 Sep 2006

The Most Excellent Concert (And My First Of Many)

Current mood: 🐱 energetic

This may be very late put on here, but I don't care.

One of the greatest rock n roll bands in the history of the world played @ the M.E.N Arena July 23rd 2006, and I was there to see them. I'm talkin about Guns n' Roses of course. I was lucky enough to be sat right near the stage, so I had a good view of all the band. Best of all, Axl still sounds as good as he did all those years ago when G n' R first started. Support band were crap (they were Bullet 4 My Valentine, so go figure) but I didnt see much of em anyway, as I got in late 2 avoid em. Although I hear that Sebastian Bach was supportin them 2, bit bummed out that I didn't see him, coz I've been hearin nothin' but good things about him (Apologies 2 Sebastian, sorry I didn't see you).

Then when they were done, I waited for an hour, when the lights went down. Some weird music started playin', but no1 payed attention to that....when all of a sudden....the openin riff 2 Welcome 2 The Jungle played, & everyone (includin me) went crazy. After a few plays of the openin riff, out of nowhere Axl screms "DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE F**K YOU ARE!!!!!!", and they launch straight in2 it. They played most of (if not all) the classic G n' R songs that we know and love, but also some new stuff from the Chinese Democracy album which has been as good as confirmed for release this year by Axl himself.

The entire playlist went something like this (although not necessarily in this order):

Welcome To The Jungle
It's So Easy
Mr Brownstone
Live And Let Die
Sweet Child O Mine
Knocking On Heavens Door
Better
The Blues
November Rain
Think About You
Out To Get Me
My Michelle
Madagascar

Extract 8. Adam's blog entitled 'The Most Excellent Concert'

Extract 8 shows the blog author (Adam) report his recent experience of a Guns and Roses concert. Adam begins with an introduction to his view on Guns and Roses ('one of the greatest rock n roll bands in the history of the world') and a construction of why his account is valid ('I was lucky enough to be sat right near the stage'). Adam's blog has obvious 'about me' qualities that was recognised in the other blogs in this chapter. Extract 8 serves as a good illustration of the brand me in action as Adam performs a self-care that aims to extend the experience of the 'me' in the blog.

In Extract 8 Adam uses the experience of the gig to construct himself as an ethical subject and invoke a high amount of relational connections in the self-narration. Adam explains that in his decision to get to the concert late he accidentally missed one of the warm-up acts. This is a discursive performance that allows for the connection with the band, for example, he writes, 'I hear that Sebastian Bach was supporting them 2, bit bummed out that I didn't see him, coz I've been hearing nothin' but good things about him (Apologies 2 Sebastian, sorry I didn't see you)'. This constitutes the 'me' in the blog as one that is relationally connected as the band and one who to the mediated community could see as connected to the band ('Apologies 2 Sebastian'). Therefore, the experience is one of a 'me' that is connected

to others and opens a particular form of experience. This shows how self-care is a modifying practice that increases the possibility for achieving other normative influences. This would give a new form of subjectivity. It would also increase the potential to communicate with other MySpace users.

The brand me is the act of realising certain relational capacities so that they can be directed towards one's own particular projects of self-care. The argument here captures something of Deleuze's (1988: 125) claim that 'the interior is only a selected interior and the exterior, a projected interior'. The brand me is the 'selected' aspects of the exterior that are invoked through a form of self-care, which steers the subjectivity of the experience towards the fulfilment of one's own projects ('a projected interior'). In Adam's blog the performance of an ethical reflection serves as a way of experiencing himself as a particular me in MySpace. The current 'me' is branded in new ways.

Extract 8 also shows the way that the modification of subjectivity through the blog is tied other modes of experience. In the later parts of the blog Adam recites the set-list from the gig he is reporting on. In mediating this experience Adam is accessing an experience of subjectivity that is tied to this event. In performing a direct link to the event Adam is able to explore the experience of being connected to an imagined community of other concert attendees. Therefore, experience is not located in strict MySpace relations but can be extends to others forms of symbolic connection.

This practice of the listing the songs is common to other forms of MySpace behaviour, particularly listing hobbies on the main page or completing one of the many personal questionnaires that feature in many parts of the profile. Perhaps, then, in listing the songs in this way, Adam, is able to mediate his experience through an established form of MySpace communication. A casual observer to the blog would instantly recognise the list as evidence of the claim that Adam visited the event and that is able to report on this experience. This shows a skill to branding the me in a way that one might not automatically be connected with the desired form of experience. The ability experience new form of subjectivity relies on capacity to mediate a sense of community through the worlds and pictures in the blog. The process of self-care allows MySpace users to continually *re-make* their experience in the blog.

This is matched by the way people can continually *re-brand* the 'me'. As with wider notions of branding, products are re-branded to increase sales. In doing so, the unique selling point of the product is shifted to match perceived levels of demand. In

the use of MySpace, blogs users are able to similarly re-brand the 'me' in order to create new forms of subjectivity and make the profile more appealing to other users. This would increase the likelihood of communication in the future. In Extract 8 there is the possibility that Adam will have future communication based on the 'me' he has constructed in the blog. Therefore, the brand me has the duel capacity of relinquishing different forms of subjectivity while simultaneously increasing the possibility of communication in the future.

10.7 Subjectivity

After forging the concept of the brand me it is fitting to re-analyse one of the earlier extracts in light of this new direction. In the first stages of this analysis the following extract was used as a way of exploring the potential for blogs to be understood as a form of self-disclosure. In the following analysis the data will be reanalysed using the focus of the brand me. This does not propose to overwrite the earlier findings but offer an alternative perspective on the data that has implications for furthering notions of experience and subjectivity.

Extract 9. Second Analysis of blog entitled 'How good am I?'

Mark's immediately demonstrates the characteristics of a confessional blog where his own experience is the object of reflection and cultivation. Mark's blog begins with reflexive performance of self-care when he writes 'sometimes I ask myself, how good am i?!?!') This statement marks experience of subjectivity as rooted in the mediation of social relations given the way that self-narration is written as if Mark is being asked by someone else. Mark continues his confession when he states 'Thems the days that I feel eighteen again' where he moves to instil a sense of process into the practice of self-narration or confession. This shows a reflective construction of the blogs that seeks a new experience of subjectivity.

Mark directly refers to his lack of access to particular normative experience when he states 'I'm only a Salesman, I'm not the Prime Minister'. Foucault (1984) argues that disciplinary power produces a wider form of social control which is normalised through the promotion of a moral code. For Mark, there should be no way of resisting this power and his experience of subjectivity is automatically controlled by the discourse. However, the construction of the brand me in the blogs is, while not completely of his own choosing, able to align experience with other normative forms of subjectivity. Mark's attempts to reclaim control of the experience, following early Foucault, would not be able to escape the power of the prevailing discourse. However, the use of the brand me shows the ability to extend experience into relationally connected forms of subjectivity.

This new form of subjectivity contains a strong presence of gender (as opposed to the rhetorical function in the earlier analysis). Mark produces a discourse of gender and sexuality as part of a construction of subjectivity. For example, he writes 'I really care about everyone in my life, I might not show it all the time, but hey, I'm a bloke…what do you expect!' This performance of masculinity is one that is bound up with a discourse of male construction of a gendered subjectivity (for further Foucault inspired investigations of gender see Coates, 1996, 2003).

The concept of the brand me is able to outline how individuals modify their experience of subjectivity through the use of self-care in a blog. This orientates towards the fulfilment of ones own personal projects or desires. This implies a certain sense of agency through the ability to adjust to other normative influences. Mark's blog presents the performance of the multiplicity of the relational connection to his family and friends ('Family, A wonderful woman in my life, Me sister, Del boy'). The

brand me accentuates his family relations as a way of attaching his experience to a particular form of subjectivity. There is constantly a range of other normatives at play.

MySpace users harness a process of self-care that produces an experience of a desired subjectivity. The brand me is the function of the blog as a way to construct and elaborate one's own subjectivity. It is ongoing, multiple and is able to define a certain mode of existence where subjectivity is produced through the organisation of a body of knowledge. This organisation focuses on experience as a particular kind of project. The brand me could be described as a modern technology of self (cf. Foucault, 1988b). An example of this claim can be seen in Mark's use of confession as a place to work on oneself as a body of knowledge. For example, consider the following line which introduces the blog, 'see I was recently berated by someone…they said I was inconsistent; that is what brought this on'. In the passage the 'what brought this on' is Mark referring to his decision to write this blog. It is then a decision, on Mark's behalf, to work on creating a new form of subjectivity through realising other normatives. The brand me is a way of extending the possible areas of experience.

Subjectivity is a multiplicity of lived experience that is part of the practice of blogging in MySpace. These multiplicities are continuously changing as the direction of the profile as a whole shifts. They may also be different to constructions in other locations on the profile (e.g. the wall). There are, as Foucault rightly pointed out, relationships between these two forms of subjectivity (current and past formations) as the different experiences overlap and interconnect. However, there is no danger of these two forms of subjectivity colliding as they relate to different forms of experience.

Mark's experience is not 'implanted' from the power/knowledge available in the blog discourse (as would have been considered from Foucault's work in the mid-1970s). Instead, the use of a reflexive turn shows an ability to achieve a desired level of subjectivity from the multiple versions of experience that contains the continued efforts to interact with the other normative capacities. In choosing to explore the aspects of self-care, this does not ignore any of the other analytic possibilities of Foucault's work. Moreover, the work that Mark performs through a 'care of self' is to recognise that a care of this kind is reliant on other forms of knowledge and performance. It is through this interdependency of knowledge and power that he is able to experience himself as an ethical self. It is through this ability to brand and *re-*

brand the 'me' that Mark is able to gain access to a desired form of subjectivity. The brand me offers the possibility to create and re-create subjectivities.

10.8 Chapter Summary

Early theories of blogging typically recognise a high level of self-disclosure in the use of blogs (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Qian & Scott, 2007). It could be for this reason that the uses of social network sites have been frequently tied with notions of narcissism (see Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). However, the data in this chapter shows how a confessional understanding of blogs (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Viégas, 2005) is better equipped to understand the social implications of the disclosure itself. In making this move, issues of power, knowledge and subjectivity have become central concerns in this analysis. The practice of blogging highlights a history of self-reflection that was of keen interest to the social theorist Michel Foucault. In using a range of Foucault's works, the use of confession allows for a new explanation of the ability to forge an experience of subjectivity in the use of the 'me' in the blog.

Following early Foucault, knowledge/power is directly available through a technology of sign systems which permits individuals (including bloggers) to view their experience. However, this analysis predominantly drew on the later aspects of Foucault's views in order to connect with a different conceptualisation of subjectivity. From this perspective, an experience of subjectivity, which is not specifically of our own choosing, is still able to work through a capacity for personal desires in realising other normatives. Blogging allows the MySpace user to an experience of subjectivity that forms around the performance of a confession. The 'brand me' explains the process of adjusting the experience to allow for other normative influences in the blog. Subjectivity is not then directly 'inscribed' on the MySpace user but is obtained through the lived experience of a multiplicity of attempts at forming the 'me'.

However, in this discussion the role of the mediated community has been overshadowed by study of a personal discourse. In the following analytic chapters the aim is to combine the importance of community influence with the internal modification of discourse that has been identified in this chapter. Perhaps, the mediated community is close to this notion of an alternative normative that the later aspects of Foucault's theories recognised? This will reconnect with a notion of the self as opposed to the wider concept of subjectivity. The following analytic chapter focuses on the practice of profile changing in MySpace.

Chapter 11:

The 'Hoped-For' Self in Profile Changes

11.1 Introduction

This chapter will continue many of the ideas from earlier analytic chapters to investigate the practice of profile changing in MySpace. This will return to the discussion of the self as opposed to the focus on subjectivity in the previous chapter. The self is described in terms of the everyday forms of self-presentation that are shaped through actual, embodied forms of social interaction. In making this move, the concept of the mediated community will remerge as a central issue in the construction of the self. This issue was overshadowed in the previous chapter by the focus on internal discourses and the influence of power/knowledge. Mediated community is the shared sense of community in MySpace that is managed through a range of symbolic practices. The phenomenon of profile changing is the analytic subject of interest. Profile changing is defined as the ability to 'update' different aspects of the profile page through the profile editor in MySpace. The changes are made to the visual and textual constitution of the space (e.g. background, design, blurb text and other features).

In an early paper, Markus and Nurius (1986) explore the possibility of the 'now' self and the 'possible' self. Markus and Nurius explore complex notions of the self that relied on looking at the way the self could be constructed in action. Higgins (1987) continued this discussion into a discussion of a sub-component of the 'possible' self known as the 'hoped-for' self. Both explanations focus on the way there are a number of possible selves that are constantly at play in interaction. This argument stresses the tension between what might be called a desired sense of self and an actual self. It highlights the way the self relates to a multiplicity of possible selves where our actions are contingent on pursuing a desired form of the self.

However, Higgins' work, like that of Markus and Nurius, cannot be directly juxtaposed with the current argument as a majority of their work focuses on a cognitive appreciation of the relationship between the now selves and possible selves.

Here they use a monolithic and uniform explanation of the self that is unlike the constructionist form of the self that features in the current definition. This offers an opportunity to rework Higgins' concept of the hoped-for self to focus on the multiple ways that individuals change their profiles to offer a way of making sense of themselves through the ongoing formations of the self. This will explore the possibility that the role of the others in the community is pivotal in the construction of the self. This analysis will begin by looking at the relational self in profile changes. For each profile, the analysis will involve a brief description of the features of the page, including textual and visual examples from other part of the page in order to contextualise the action of the profile change.

11.2 The Relational Self in Profile Changes

The notion of the 'relational self' is a relatively under-explored area of constructionism (Burr, 2002). In the analysis of the following data, the relational self is an opportunity to explore the experience of MySpace in terms of the collective, relational act of profile changing. This intends to take the notion of the relational self beyond its current usage and incorporates notions of process and performance. The first piece of data that will feature in this chapter is the profile changes made by a female MySpace user – Jane. Jane was identified from the quantitative analysis as a user who updates her profile regularly. Each of her profile changes will be explored in terms of the construction of the self. The following analysis will include a range of activities from the profile page in order to obtain an interactional context for the changes. Here is the first of Jane's profile pages in the sequence:
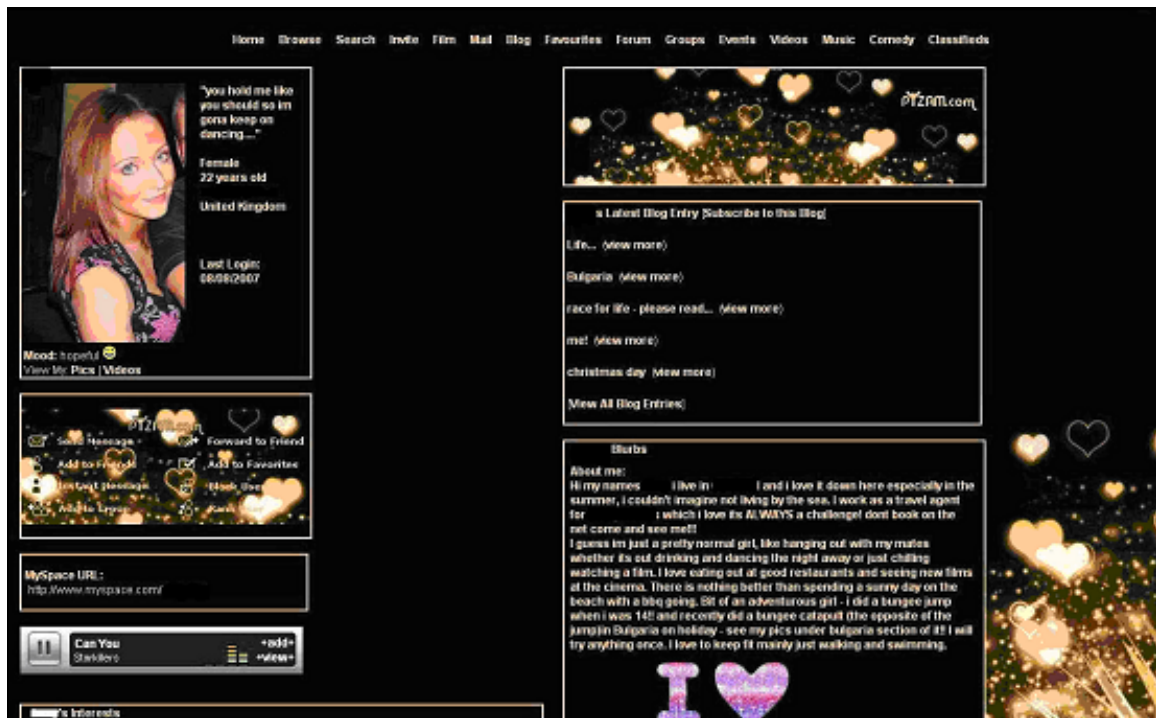
Extract 10 shows that Jane's profile has a background which is made up of a mixture of black and gold sparks that emanate from an explosive, firework-like blast in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. The performance of every minute detail of the page has been crafted to a particular style, even the clothes Jane is wearing in the profile photograph accentuates the colours in the rest of the background. Jane's profile photograph matches the informal passport-style photograph that is popular in most MySpace profiles. The photograph was not self-taken (as is the case with many MySpace photos, through the use of a webcam) and could be widely recognisable to a selection of other MySpace users who may have attended the same event at which the photo was taken.

Jane's display name reads, 'you hold me like you should so I'm gonna keep on dancing…' This text could easily have been taken from another source (for example, a song) and appears to perform something of a desire for a continued relational connection. Jane has also selected her 'mood' as 'hopeful' which is accompanied by an emoticon depicting a smiley face (The 'mood' is a feature of the MySpace page that allows users to choose from a select list of 'moods'). The profile page shows a symbolic construction of relations connections that involves multiple modes of

expression. For example, the following statement is taken from the 'blurb' section of the profile:

> I guess I'm just a pretty normal girl, like hanging out with my mates whether its out drinking and dancing the night away or just chilling and watching a film.

This narrative constructs Jane as a typical MySpace member who would enjoy many of the same activities as the perceived audience. Jane constructs herself as 'just a pretty normal girl'. This shows the desire to invoke an ordinary construction of the self. It is clear that a large amount of time and effort is invested in appearing ordinary. The ability to appear just like everybody else, the same, actually requires a considerable amount of effort in MySpace profiles. The performance of the self positions the user through the use of ordinary identity category. This invokes a relational form of the self where Jane is easily matched to the other members of her imagined community. Here is the screenshot of Jane's profile after her first set of changes:
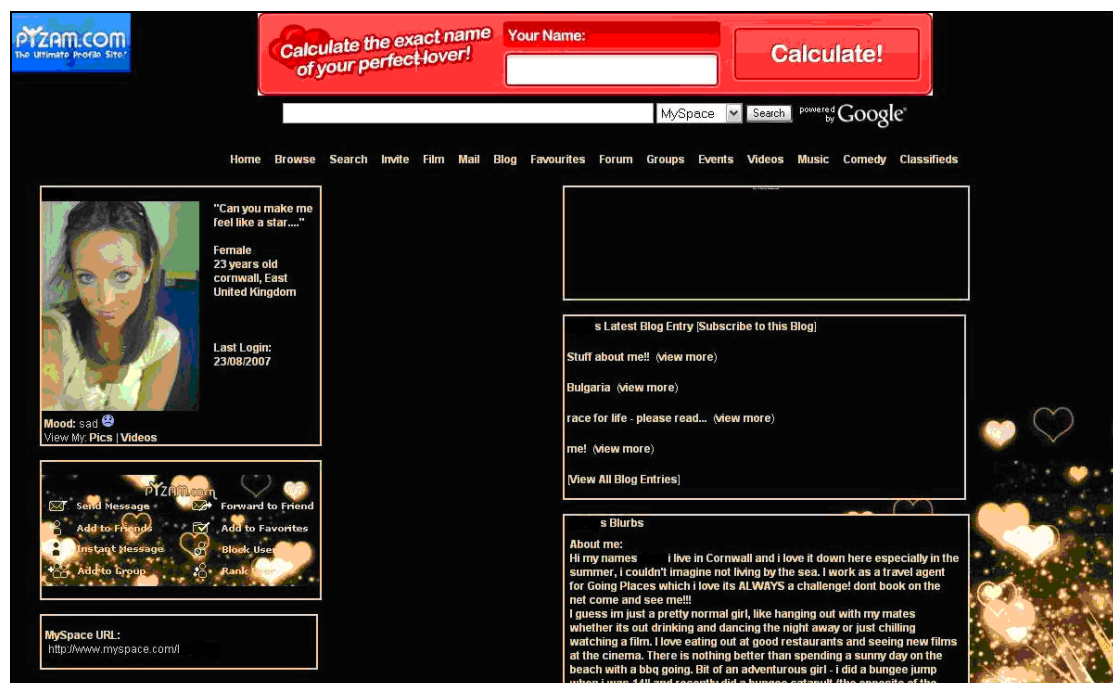
Extract 11. Screenshot of Jane's second profile page.

Extract 11 shows a variety of changes to Jane's profile. Each section of the profile is open to change through the profile editor. Most notably, the profile photograph has been changed to one that is considerably different from the previous profile. In the new photograph, Jane is in a different setting and uses an up-close camera angle. From the style of the photograph it would appear that it has been self-taken (a common practice for MySpace users). In the new profile page, the mood setting has been changed from 'hopeful' to 'sad' and the display name has also changed from 'you hold me so I wanna keep on dancing' to 'Can you make me feel like a star…' The song choice has been changed to 'Need to feel loved' and the graphic denoting 'I love my sailor' has been removed from the bottom part of the profile.

The changes signal a construction of 'sadness' as each of the positive features from the previous profile have either been replaced or removed. Jane's construction of the self invokes the shared sense of community presence. Here the construction of the page is calling to the members of the mediated community. From this new profile the first turn in the conversation in constructed in the profile. These changes show the way that the relational connections in MySpace are performed through the construction of the profile page. The following post is taken form the wall section of the profile at the same time the changes were made. The wall post is from a MySpace friend named English Rose. Here is a screenshot of the post:

English_Rose	28 Aug 2007 3:07
	Hey Jane, How r u? i haven't really spoken 2 u properly since u have been added 2 my list of friends, Hope everything is cool!!
	Take care!
	English_Rose x
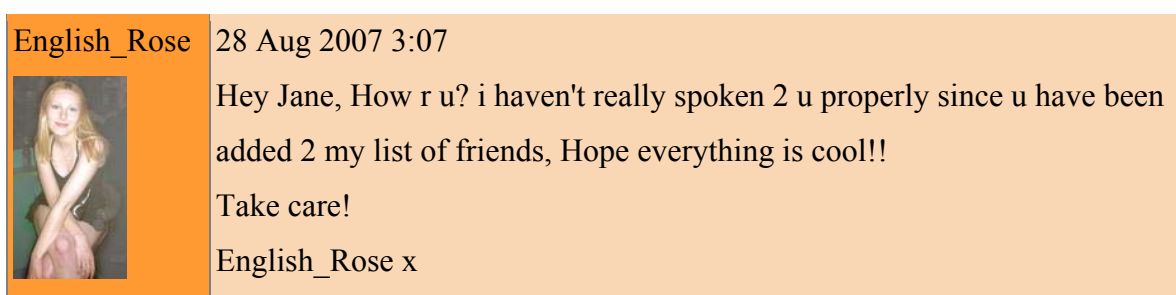
Extract 12. Screenshot of the wall post from English Rose to Jane.

Extract 12 shows a wall post from English Rose that begins by constructing a reason for contacting Jane 'I haven't really spoken to you since you joined my list of friends'. This orientates to some form of profiling activity where there is a need to contact another user after becoming friends. English Rose does not directly address the changes Jane has made to her profile as the main section of the post is constructed towards a generic form of conversation, for example, English Rose writes 'Hope

everything is cool!!' and 'Take care'. In is in this section that the post seems to construct an increased sense of concern that could be due to the changes made to the profile. This shows that the profile pages are constructed to invoke a relational sense of connection through a range of language practices and other symbolic systems. The implication is that in changing the different aspects of the profile Jane is able to connect with a mediated community.

However, as with earlier example of the relation construction of the self, there is a relationship between closeness and distance that appears to the guide the performance of the profile changes. For example, in her wall post English Rose does not directly orientate to the changes in Jane's profile and keeps the interaction at a peripheral level where she is responding in a general manner. It could be that a response of any kind is seen as positive reaction to the profile changes. As the profile is constructing the self as one of 'sadness' then the cause for this current sadness provides a reason to communicate further in MySpace.

Extract 11 shows that Jane's profile is constructed to call for someone to 'make her feel loved' in a style that invokes an imagined sense of community who would be invested in such a claim. This is a discursive construction that provides a feeling of shared space where her changes are able to directly communicate with a perceived audience. The reference to a singular recipient of her changes (can *you* make me feel like a star) the practice signals to a wider sense of imagined community. The fact that the display name references 'me' ('can you make *me* feel like a star…') performs these changes as appertaining to her profile explicitly. This shows a way of carving-out a space for the relational self to perform different imagined connections.

The relational self in the profile changes is, like the use of wall posting, a way of constituting the self as part of a network of relations in MySpace. These relations allow the user to construct a connection to a shared sense of community. Profile changes access relies on a shared vernacular of change in MySpace. The subtle differences to the display name suggest that intricate changes to a MySpace page have the ability to communicate to a wide scale of potential community members. The profile changes mediate an experience of the imagined ability to affect others. This discussion will be explored in the final of Jane's profile pages.
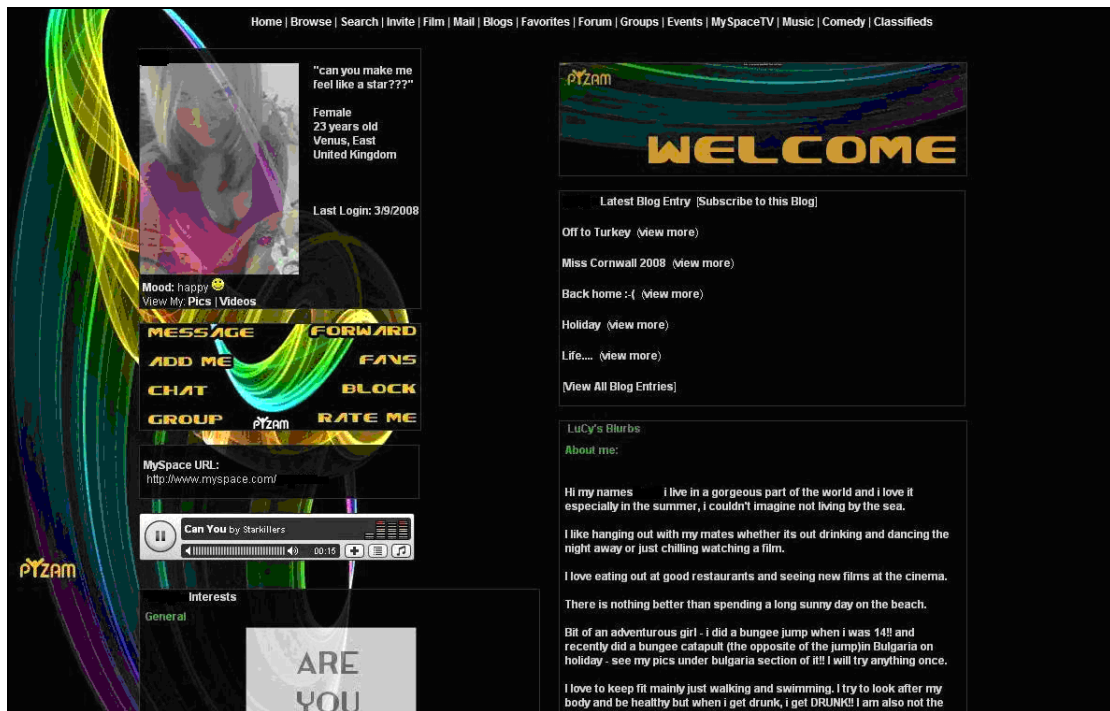
Extract 13. Screenshot of Jane's second profile page.

Extract 13 shows the final set of Jane's profile changes and marked difference to the earlier two profile pages. Most notably, the background image has been substituted for a new background that emphasises a kaleidoscope of colours and shapes. Jane has also added a new profile photograph that performs a ramped-up sense of femininity. The photograph is considerably different to the previous profile photograph as Jane is gazing directly into the camera and from a diverse angle (the previous photographs showed her sideways-on and at a distance). The impact of such a photograph constructs a sense of confidence and enthusiasm that is echoed in the bright colours in the rest of the profile. This is then an opposite performance of the 'sad' construction of the self in the previous profile.

Jane has also changed her display name to include a capital letter in the middle of her name. This again emphasises a performance of difference (from 'Jane' to 'JaNe'). This transition is shown in the change to the display name that features the addition of question marks in the tag line ('Can you make me feel like a star???'). As with the first set of profile changes, there is a concentrated performance of difference. This performance of difference is part of the way the self is constructed in MySpace, specifically crafted to speak to a specific sense of community.

Further evidence for this claim can be seen in the 'about me' section of the page where Jane has bolstered the text with reference to her 'love of the sixties' and a discourse around a hatred of spiders. Through invoking the topic of spiders Jane constructs an interaction of a certain kind; one where it would be easy to envisage numerous conversations that spans from these new textual addictions to the page. The construction of self in this new profile is shifting the performance of relational self in order to relinquish a further layer of experience. In asking 'Can you make me feel like a star??' the members of her imagined community are performatively called into action. It is through the perceived ability to connect with an imagined community that Jane constitutes the self in the profile.

In Extract 13 the blurb features the removal of the phrase 'I guess I'm a pretty normal girl' which has been replaced with a discourse around 'a love for the sixties'. This removal could be due to an inconsistent rhetoric with the construction of the self in other parts of the profile. In the new profile page, the construction of ordinariness ('I guess I'm a pretty normal girl') is no longer required. Jane accounts for the changes by building a narrative into the different profiles (from sad to happy etc.). Each of the changes speaks to the changing construction of the self depending on the local context of relational connections and the desires in MySpace. In following each of the changes, it is clear how the new profile represents an outcome of the context in the earlier profile page. So, in the final profile, the increased level of femininity and other previous constructions are potentially a reaction to the earlier presentation of the self. It is also worth noting that this data only represents a snapshot of the ongoing narrative in the profile changes and consequently this narrative could be part of a larger phenomenon. The interactional work that is involved with a multiplicity of profile changes relies on an ability to keep within the boundaries of a perceived community.

Jane is then creating the context for the profile changes through the information presented on the profile. Jane builds the narrative into her profile changes through her felt reaction of her imagined community (for example, the construction of a sad profile allows for the imagined connection that desires her to be happy). The relational connections that are built up through the profile changes does not mean that users can be 'whoever they want', and as with real life, the ability to develop a different sense of self requires a great deal of interactional effort. This explains the need for a narrative in the profile changes.

In considering the self in this manner is to move closer to the work of Judith Butler. In Butler's (2005) work there is an emphasis of the way we make sense ourselves through others. This is supported by what Mitchell (2008: 417: original emphasis) describes as 'a process of *making-sense*-of oneself and others, oneself for others, [and] oneself through others'. The change to the profile introduces a change to the relational connections that has implications for how users make sense of themselves in MySpace. The profile changes are constructed in light of the felt community presence and how MySpace users recognise their potential to communicate with others.

Butler (2005) explains how the social world is 'already-constituted' and continues the idea that our actions require mobilising certain social relations. This unites wit the idea of the mediated community as 'just here'. The mediated community is 'already-constituted' and relies on the MySpace users *acting into* the social world. Therefore, the practice of profile changing is culturally accepted way of performing an imagined community. In the following set of data, the aim is to further explore the way that MySpace users make sense of themselves through the 'already-constituted' form mediated community. This will show how certain mediated communities require a particular form of social engagement. The issue then becomes how MySpace users can shift their connections to different mediated communities in MySpace? This will explore the potential for shifting relations of imagined community through the use of the profile change function in MySpace.

11.3 Shifting Community Relations

This section will look at the profile changes made by the MySpace user Alo*Vera*. It shows the transition from one mediated community to another through the use of imagined relational connections. Supporting the possibility that there are multiple sets of communities in MySpace which are defined by a shared experience of connection and are managed through a set of relational connections (as in the previous profile changes). In the following example, the data shows a dramatic change from one community to another as the use of the profile changes shifts to a new performance of community ties. This does not imply any action by the community itself as it based on the actions of a MySpace user that performs a new connection with an imagined sense of community. From this perspective, the self is constituted in the profile changes through the shifting pattern of community relations. These movements are played-out

in the profile changes and include the multiple modes of expression across the MySpace profile. The following extract is taken from the profile of Alo*Vera*. This is the first of her profiles and shows a large amount of religious discourse on her page.
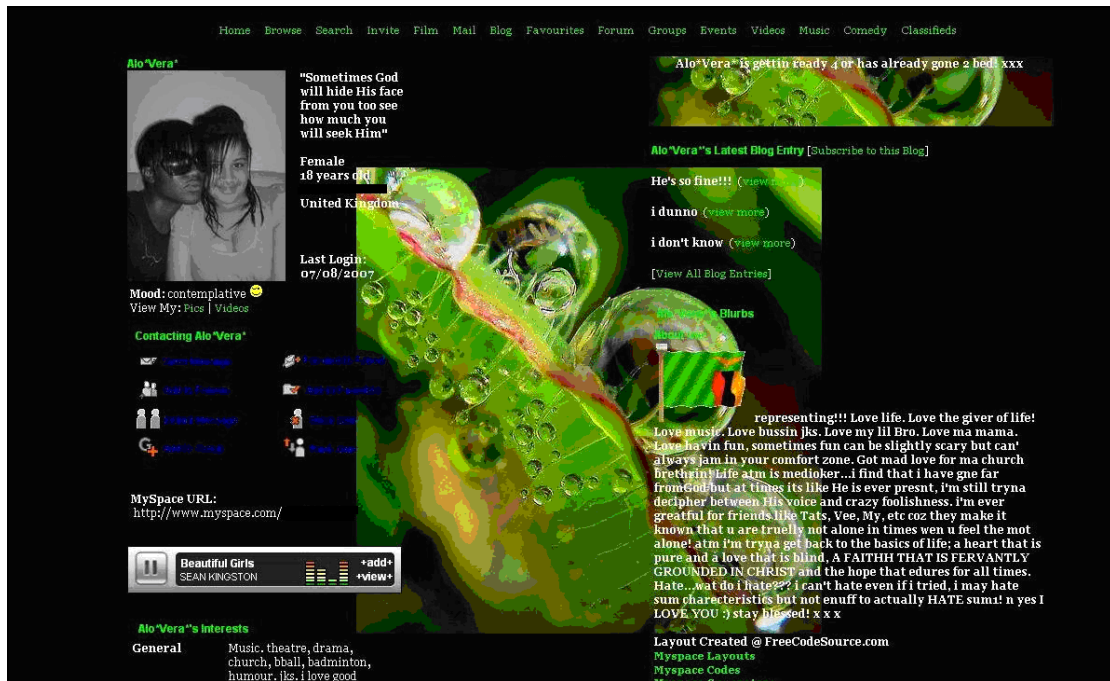
Extract 14. **Screenshot of Alo* Vera*'s first profile page**

Extract 14 shows that Alo*Vera* has a strong visual presence to her page through the use of sharp contrasting colours that focus around a large image in the centre of the page. As with most members, the background is from a specific site that specialises in personal backgrounds. Alo *Vera* professes to a Christian faith that features in each of the textual aspects of the page. For example, her tag line reads 'Sometimes God will hide his face from you too see how much you will seek him'. In other profiles, the tag line is typically reserved for a quip, joke or song lyric (as with Jane's profile). However, for Alo*Vera*, it serves as a place to perform a display of religious beliefs.

The profile features the 'daily verse' application which contains daily updates from random verses of the Bible. This section clarifies the religious sentiment in the blurb and allows other MySpace members to network through the application. Most aspects of the profile have a religious sentiment at the heart of the design and implementation. The only aspect of the page that avoids religious discourse is that of the song choice. Alo* Vera* has a song by *Sean Kingston* entitled 'Beautiful Girls'

which was popular at the time of data collection. This song plays automatically when the page is opened.

Alo*Vera* is a frequent user of MySpace pages and her profile page shows a large number of posts on the wall. Alo*Vera* has a display name that reads 'Love life. Love the giver of life'. The blurb also continues the religious sentiment in the use of the line, 'I find that I have gone far from God' and later in the blurb she writes 'still tryna decipher between his love and his crazy foolishness'. The mood choice is 'contemplative' and two of the three blog posts have ambivalent titles, such as, 'I dunno' and 'He's so fine'. The conclusion to the blog 'I dunno' features the following passage:

> wat do i hate?? i can't hate even if i tried, i may hate some characteristics but not enuff to actually HATE sum1! n yes I LOVE YOU :) stay blessed'.

In Extract 14 Alo*Vera* performs a thoughtful narrative in the blurb that grapples with the concept of 'hate'. There is a portrayal of an internal dialogue ('wat do i hate??') which has undertones of a confessional nature to the use of MySpace that was identified in the analytic chapter dedicated to the practice of blogging. Alo*Vera*, unlike Jane, appears to demonstrate little evidence of other relational connections in her page. The self is primarily constituted through references to religious activities and texts that can be seen in the blog post where Alo*Vera* announces 'I LOVE YOU ;) stay blessed'. Therefore, Alo*Vera* can be considered to imagine a community of religiously orientated members who are likely to similarly mediate a high level of religious discourse in their profiles. This would provide a clear outline of the mediated community through a shared vernacular of religious discourse.

For Alo*Vera*, the profile is a powerful performance of religious faith and would be instantly recognisable to a perceived set of community members. Alo*Vera* mediates an 'already-constituted' set of practices that may have transferred from another setting (e.g. a church). Much of the discourse that can be found on the page echoes the religious sentiments of other interactions (for example, with other church members). This construction is followed into the first set of changes that Alo*Vera* makes to her page. Here is the screenshot of the updated profile:
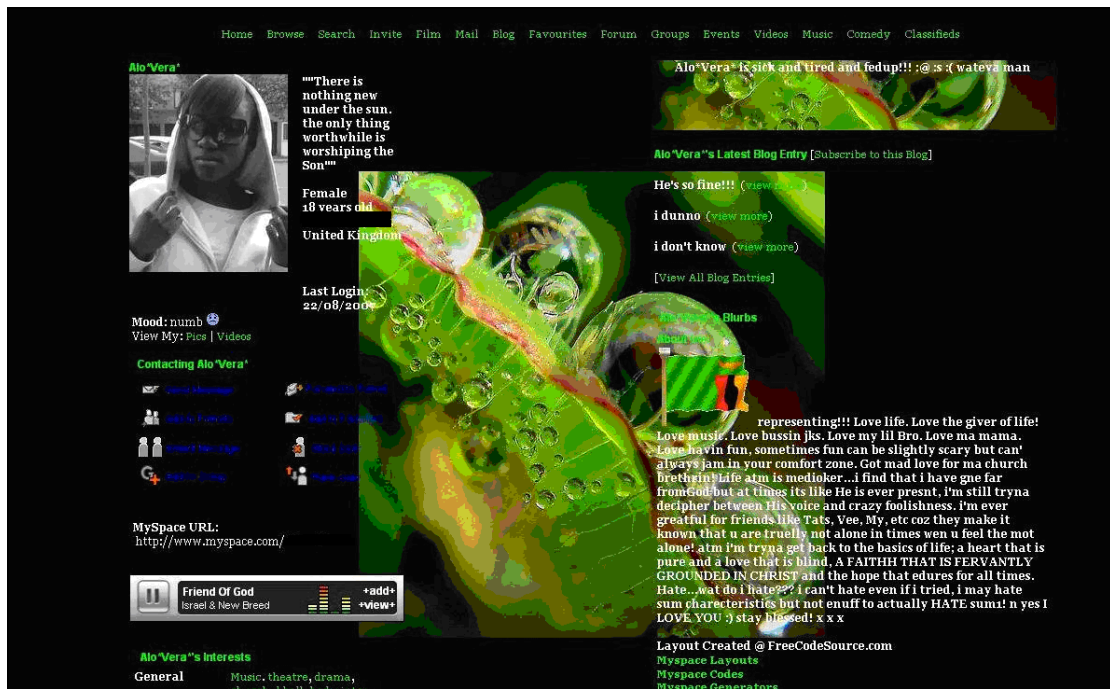
Extract 15. Screenshot of Alo* Vera*'s second profile page

Extract 15 shows that Alo*Vera* has made a minimal set of changes to her profile page. Her tag line has been updated to a line that continues the Christian sentiment in the first profile and reads 'there is nothing new under the sun. the only thing worthwhile is worshipping the son.' The new tag line, similar to the first, is a Bible reference that appears to have been sourced from another location (the Daily Bible verse application is one possibility). The religious rhetoric implies a drive for a better life through typical religious discourses of striving and reaching. Alo*Vera* uses strings of religious discourse to accentuate a construction of the Christian self. In terms of the visual aspects of the page, the profile remains largely dominated by a neutral image in the centre of the screen. The changes to the profile maintain the dominant Christian rhetoric from the first profile, and even the song choice (that appeared to be the only sign of a non-religious element to her page) has been changed from *Sean Kingston's* 'Beautiful Girls' to 'Friend of God' by *Israel and the New Breed*. This appears to remove any form of contradictory meanings from the page.

However, there appears to be a new area of contradictory discourse in this profile that can be seen in the list of activities that have been added to the biographical section of the profile. Here, Alo*Vera* lists that she enjoys 'bball, badminton and humor', which have been added to the original interests from the first profile of 'music, theatre, drama, church'. Here, church still features in her interests but it is part

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of a wider, generic set of interests. In this context, the use of adding 'bball, badminton, humour' could be an attempt to do other forms of ordinary MySpace behaviour that are outside of the strong religious performance. However, one might conclude that the decision to list that one does 'humour' might show a relative lack of inexperience in MySpace practices. Many of the users attempt to *convey* humour through the use of jokes, cartoons or other comedic references as opposed to listing it as one of their interests.

After this set of profile changes, Alo*Vera* receives a post that may aid the interpretation of the changes. The following wall post shows how certain actions on the wall could further mediate existing practices of religiosity. In the following extract there is clear evidence of the way that wall posts come to mean more than the actual words in the posts as they are treated as a form of 'blessing'. Consider the following exchange:

Alo*Vera*	9 Aug 2007 6:00
	wass gain an B! thot i'd dro a few blessings on your page(with me its mo than 1!)
	stay in His will...
	xoxox

baison	12 Aug 2007 4:53
	Hey ma, U grab as much Blessing as u want from my page coz therez mo where those came from... Matta-o-fact, thot I cme thu with some now on yo page. Stay Blessed!

Extract 16. Screenshot of the wall conversation between Alo*Vera* and baison.

Extract 16 shows how the phenomena of 'blessings' are shared through the MySpace network. Alo*Vera* writes that she is bringing a blessing to basion's profile ('thot i'd dro a few blessings on your page'). In visiting the profiles of other religious users, Alo*Vera* is able to constitute herself as spiritually generous. The wall post acts as a way of blessing the entire profile as the two users speak of the blessings with reference to the entire page. This signals a practice of visiting other pages of known religious friends (who they may have met through a religious group, for example) and leaving a blessing on their page. The act of delivering a blessing may then prompt the other users to look at the rest of her profile. The analysis of Alo*Vera*'s profile shows that the profile communicates the same religious sentiment as the individual act of blessing in the wall post. The reception of the blessing could be tied to the changes that Alo* Vera* made to her profile (if one is to follow that the wall is known site to react to change in the profile). In delivering the blessing, Alo*Vera* is mediating community membership and shapes the religious construction of the self through joint interaction. The use of the emoticon in basion's post also constitutes a religious construction at a visual level.

The act of receiving the blessing is also of interactional significance. From basion's response it is clear that the practice of blessing requires acceptance from the owner of the profile. As with the giving of a blessing in a traditional religious setting, or through the notion of a gift as a whole, there is process that relies on the reception of the blessing. As can be seen in Extract 16, baison welcomes Alo*Vera* to his page and is positive in his reaction to the blessing; 'U grab as much blessing as you want coz therez mo where that cam from'. Interestingly, even though the first post appeared to show Alo*Vera* offering the blessing to baison, his acceptance is one that implies it is for her to receive this blessing. For example, baison writes '*U grab* as much blessing as you want' (emphasis added). The act of the giving the blessing could have a different set of semantic qualities. The difference to Alo*Vera* is the ability to mediate a certain form of the self. In using MySpace as a site for mediating some action there is a level of complexity that is provided by the use of MySpace. This adds a new layer of complexity of mediating 'already-constituted' practices in this way. The impact of this mediation could be played-out in the changes Alo*Vera* makes to her profile page. It is here where the shifting construction of the self forms a new connection with an imagined set of community relations.
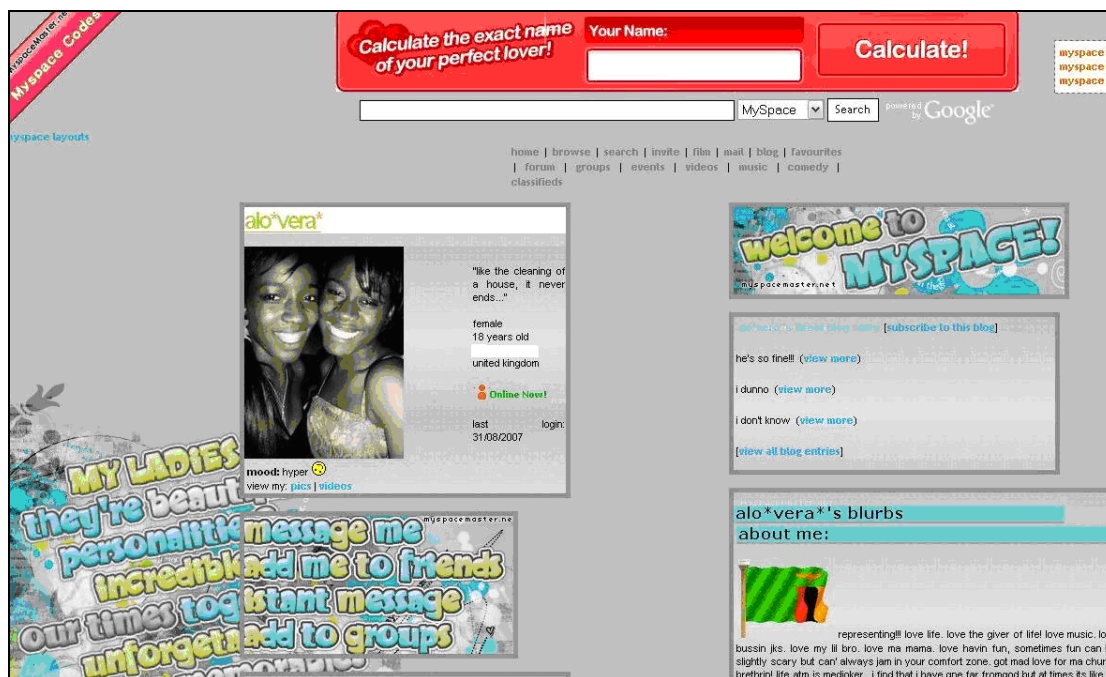
Extract 17 shows that Alo*Vera* makes a set of large scale changes to her profile page. These changes characterise a shift from a strong sense of a religious performance to one that extenuates the connection to a mediated community of friends. In this profile change, the majority of the religious texts have been removed and a large amount of references to her friends and family have been added. This creates a different construction of the self to the previous profile and projects an alternative sense of imagined connections. The most notable aspect of the profile change is the new background image which features a colourful line of text denoting a reference to friendship. The text reads 'my ladies, they're beautiful, personalities, incredible, our times together are unforgettable'. The text makes direct relevance to a group that forms the new imagined community. Alo*Vera* refers to this group as 'my ladies'. These changes shift the construction the self in a way that demonstrates a different community connection.

In performing this new connection Alo*Vera* is attending to an alternative set of issues in the profile. In this new vision of community, there is a need to construct the importance of the friendships across the different aspects of the profile. This shows the multiple self in action through the use of the profile changes. It provides an opportunity to re-shape the performance of the self. There are clearly personal desires

that inform the decision to change the profile in such a way but these issues become mobilised at a social level. Noticeably, in this profile mode, Alo*Vera* does not receive any wall posts of a religious sentiment or any further 'blessings'. Instead, the majority of the posts become orientated towards conversations with a variety of female users who could represent the community of 'my ladies' who Alo*Vera* signals in the new profile.

It is noteworthy that the profile page positions the self as connected to a group of '*my* ladies'. The fact that the group members represent 'my ladies' and are not simply a friendship group that *she belongs to* could be significant. Alo*Vera* performs her relationship to the group as more than just a member of the community whereby she is able to feel responsible for the group. It is therefore important to not only constitute the self as a member of a mediated community but feel that one has the capacity to move the whole group in a particular direction. This has been highlighted in other notions of the self which explore the way group membership relies on the ability to do more than simply re-produce a particular set of norms (see Burkitt, 2008; Shotter, 1984).

The multiple nature of the self means that constructions of this kind are likely to be numerous across the MySpace. The changes should not be considered in a linear form (even though the data would suggest that Alo*Vera* is changing from one position to the other in the profile changes) as, in reality, it would take little work for Alo*Vera* to return the profile to the previous state. Therefore, the multiple layers of the self are overlapping in their formation. In performing the self in this way there are a series of ongoing attempts at presenting a desired version of the self. To some extent, the self relies on always being in process and will require multiple attempts at forming new versions of the self. Wenger (1998) outlines this fluidity is part of the everyday practice of all communities. He argues that the continually changing form of the self relies on the use of 'imagination':

> Imagination allows us to adopt other perspectives across boundaries and time, to visit 'otherness' and to let it speak its own language. It also allows us to include history in our sense of the present and to explore possible futures. It can produce representations and models that trigger new interpretations. In turn, engagement provides a place for imagination to land, to be negotiated into practice and realized into the identities of participation. This process

requires and opening of participation that allows imagination to have effects beyond itself so that we may learn form it by bringing in back into a form of engagement. (Wenger, 1998: 217)

Wenger uses Levinas' conception of 'otherness' to consider the power of imagination in social practices. It is through visiting this otherness that individuals are able to 'explore possible futures'. This could similarly be the case for MySpace users who construct multiple versions of the self through the use of profile changing. Each of the new versions of the self requires the imaginative connections with other users that provide a way of making sense of ourselves in MySpace. More relational connections allow a 'place for imagination to land'. This explains the use of profile changing as an imaginative engagement with possible selves that reflects back into the way users experience the site. For Alo*Vera*, the shaping of her experience in the final set of profile changes, offers an alternative position to the Christian construction in the earlier profiles. The changes illustrate a possible attempt at gaining a different experience of the self in MySpace. Furthermore, this shows that MySpace users are acutely aware of the significance of a *large-scale* profile change as a way of transforming the self through the visual interpretation of the changes.

Profile changing allows MySpace users to experiment with their imaginative performance of desired relational connections in MySpace. The experience of the lived multiplicity of these positioning leads to a subjectivity that is able to mobilise other external normatives. This connects with a wider sense of subjectivity that understands discourses, while not of our own choosing, having the ability to realise other normatives capacities. Following this argument, Gill (2008: 439) argues that we should view subjectivity with the power to be 'made and remade'. Gill looks to advance the Foucauldian idea that subjectivity is produced in discourse and explores the possibility of a mutual shaping between culture and subjectivity. Gill's argument shows the possibility of finding new ways of formulating subjectivity. This notion of subjectivity is echoed in the actual practices of the self that have been identified in this chapter. The actual use of the self will be further explored through the following discussion of the *hoped-for* self.

11.4 The Hoped-For Self

The previous section identified the imaginative use of the self in the MySpace profile changes. Due to the multiple nature of the self there are an ongoing set of selves in action that manifest as a changing version of the self in profile changes. One could describe these selves as fundamentally *hoped-for* as they relate to a desired form of self that is specifically crafted to appeal to an imagined sense of community. This community is not 'real' and does not act in any particular way (if we recall it is 'just there') but gain significance through the particular way it is mediated. Therefore, the multiple forms of the self are hoped-for due to the mediation of a sense of community in MySpace. In practice, the hoped-for self requires constructing a multitude of different forms the self in order to satisfy the multiplicity of perceived communities.

The additional work involved with the relational connections (performing certain identity claims, for example) increases the likelihood that the hoped-for self might become 'actualised' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). One form of actualisation could be seen as the transition from the hoped-for self to the now self. In an early discussion of the self, Markus and Nurius (1986) argue how a persons conception of themselves is positioned as part of the 'now' selves or the 'possible' selves. Higgins (1987) continued this finding to recognise a sub-component of the possible selves in the form of the 'hoped-for' possible selves. Both explanations attempt to explain the way a set of desired selves become relevant over time. One might argue that Markus and Nurius explain the difference between the possible self and the now self as one of actualisation.

However, the movement between the possible selves and the now selves is contrary to the notion of actualisation, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, due to the way that actualisation is constantly in a process of 'becoming'. This process of becoming would contradict the possibility that anything could have final position or an end. This is an idea that is shared in by Levinas' (although explained quite differently) in that way that infinity always resists totality. It is for this reason that the construction of the self is permanently hoped-for, not because it is somewhere between a current version of the self and a desired self, but because it is locked in a state of hoped-for-ness due to the inherent levels of multiplicity and change.

This concept of a hoped-for self is able to connect with a general notion of possibility and imagination that are common practices of all communities (Wenger, 1998). There is a sense of process in the way that the self is constantly being modified by shifting a position to constitute ourselves as part of a different imagined community. One could say that that the hoped-for self, like that of the earlier example of the 'brand me', is constantly in the process changing or re-branding. This is aiming to constantly shape individual desires within the possibility of a multiplicity of community ties. The experience of profile changing allows the user to make sense of themselves through this shifting pattern of hoped-for versions of the self.

However, as previously discussed, the multiplicity of the self does not mean that is delivered to us in a somehow disjointed form. In looking at the profile pages the overlapping forms of the self should not be viewed in a linear form. Even though the profile pages may seem static and fixed, they are reliant of forms of movement and process. Therefore, each page is treated in terms of the previous constructions of the self, even if these profiles are no longer visible to the community as a whole. This means that the users are able to build on the narratives in previous profiles (from 'happy' to 'sad' for example). However, they are no longer held accountable for the previous construction of the self in the current forms of interaction. For example, the final profile changes that Alo*Vera* made to her page where all sense of a religious self had been substituted for a performance of friendship. The past constructions aided the final changes but did not leave Alo*Vera* responsible for the self in the earlier profiles. This is because, even though there are multiple forms of the self, they are still delivered to in a coherent whole where, like a crescendo of musical phrases, the multiple forms of the self fold into one another in the overall appreciation of the piece. The following analysis will further support this claim using a new piece of data. Consider this screenshot from the MySpace user 'It's a Casual Thing':

Extract 18. Screenshot 'It's a Casual Thing''s first profile page

Extract 18 shows that It's a Casual Thing (or just 'Casual') performs a male identity through a range of iconic images that mobilise the symbolism of 'lad' identity. In the previous section of the analysis the focus exemplified the practice of the hoped-for self. In this screenshot it can be seen that Casual manages a hoped-for version of the self through the use of symbolic references to a lad culture. Casual is attempting to connect with an imagined sense of community that has a shared appreciation of this culture. In his profile, Casual has chosen to use a dimly lit profile photograph that distorts his body image and promotes the rest of his profile (notably the profile background). Casual's profile has the tag line that reads 'Creamfields Aug 25th … loving it!!' and according to creamfields.com, Creamfields is 'the crown jewels of dance festivals and continues to be in the top five festivals in the UK'[6]. This performs his 'locatedness' to the mediated community through a shared construction of identity claims (see also the analysis in Chapter 9). The self is constructed as connected to the imagined community through a symbolic connection to a particular form of identity. It also sets his profile as 'active' by demonstrating his social plans in the near future.

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[6] http://www.creamfields.com/. Accessed 1/11/08

The name 'It's a Casual Thing' appears to have a connection with the phrase 'Vic Casuals' which appears in the interactive box. The background of the box is dominated by the visual representation of a winter jacket. This jacket is iconic of the football 'firm' identity and further symbolises the connection to a particular community. This construction of the self is then one that is hoped-for in terms of the current performance of the connections. The profile background could be shared by the rest of the group on their MySpace pages an act of positioning themselves within the mediated community of the Vic Casuals. The interactive box displays the phrase 'your going home in a Yorkshire ambulance'. This would seem to reaffirm the proximal relevance of 'Yorkshire' while reaffirming the views on violence that are closely associated with the firm identity category.

When opening Casual's page one is greeted by the song 'Ebenezeer Goode' by *The Shamen*. In the 'who I'd like to meet' section of Casual's profile, there is a list of iconic male figures who demonstrate a further construction of a link to a particular identity including: 'Muhammed Ali', 'Liam and Noel Gallagher' and 'Ray Winstone'. Each of these statements further develops the hoped-for version of the self in the profile that accentuates a connection to a particular imagined community. In his blurb Casual describes himself as a 'fairly confident' person who likes 'a good night out or a holiday with the lads'. His profile shows that at the time of this study Casual had nearly three hundred friends (273 exactly). If we recall from the statistics chapter, having over 200 friends is supposed to indicate a high social status (Vanden Boogart, 2006; Walther, 2008). This would imply that Casual has a high level of social capital that is demonstrated in his ability to communicate through all aspects of his profile page. The following screenshot shows the changes that Casual makes to his profile:

Extract 19 shows the changes to Casual's profile. The first noticeable change is that the display name which shows that 'It's a Casual Thing' has been changed to 'Vic Casual' (a phrase that was previously was previously only found in the interactive box). The profile picture has also changed to a new photograph of Casual with another male. This male appears to be wearing a form of tartan plaid jacket that matches the image of a jacket from the first profile. This shows a continuous connection across the visual elements of the profile where the clothing that people wear in the profile photographs has a direct relevance to the construction of the self in the profile itself.

Extract 19 shows that Casual has also changed the tag line on his profile. The tag line has been changed from 'Creamfields Aug 25th…loving it' to 'It's Grim up north'. This performs the comparable difference from the positive construction of 'Creamfields..loving it' to the negativity of being 'up north'. This could imply a shifting nature of the profile as a whole. This difference may be used to signal other, more subtle changes in the profile, where without such signals the other alterations may have gone unnoticed. The blurb section of Casual's profile has been subject to a subtle number of changes that include a list of self-characteristics as opposed to a continuous narrative. The blurb has been divided up into a list of short descriptions that are commenting on the 'things in life [he] couldn't live without', which include:

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'1) family and friends 2) Football – Leeds United and England 3) Alcoholism – Strongbow Love it!!!' This list performs a relational connection in the profile that constructs his experience through a relation with others. Casual is performing a version of self that constitutes his place in the mediated community. This supports the constitution of the lad identity.

Casual uses a set of changes (for example, the change to the display name) that signal his ongoing commitment to the lad construction of the self. It is this version that is hoped-for in the current set of profile changes. The combination of the visual (e.g. the symbolism of the jacket) and the textual (e.g. 'it's grim up north') that Casual is able to constitute himself as members of the group. In comparison to Alo*Vera*, the profile appears to be set in a global set of discourses (around religion in the example of Alo*Vera*) that would enable access to a potentially wide-scale imagined sense of community. The final set of changes to Casual's profile show more dramatic set of changes to the profile. Here is the screenshot of the changes:
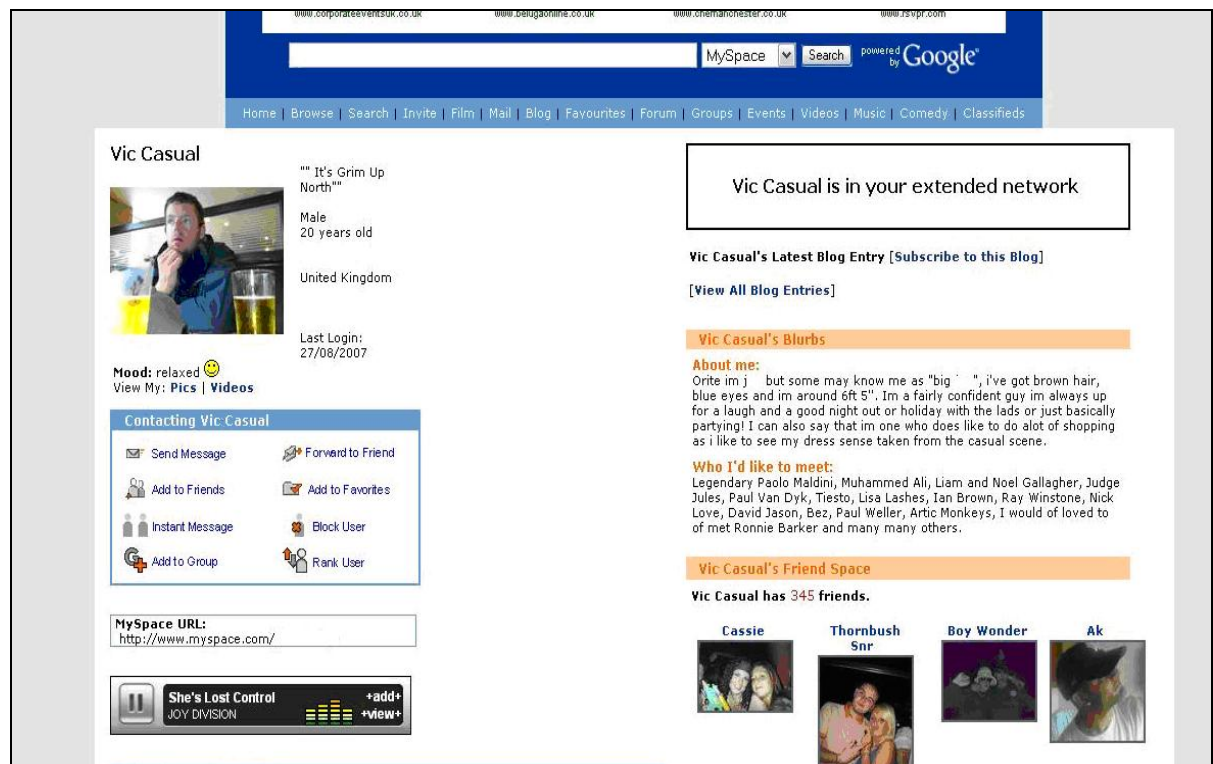
Extract 20. Screenshot of It's a Casual Things's third profile page.

Extract 20 shows a set of large-scale changes to Casual's profile. The profile background has been completely removed including of all of the iconic imagery and symbolism that was identified in the earlier profile pages. This shows a different performance of the self, one that is no longer concerned with appealing to a particular mediated community. In so doing, the profile does not constitute the self as a member of the lad identity category. This profile change performs a new version of the self that lacks a specific form of mediation due to the way the profile has been left in the default position. This indicates that the new direction of the self may be secondary to a desire to change from the old. The profile could be considered as 'under construction' a good analogy for the time that Casual is taking to formulate the new direction for the self.

Much of the blurb has remained the same during the second change and Casual has chosen to keep the same set of 'top 8' friends (something which may had been more illustrative as distance from a particular friendship group had they been changed). What is noticeable is that Casual has gained over 70 friends (from 273 to 345) since his last profile change. This data reformulates the finding that a high number of friends lead to a high level of social status (Vanden Boogart, 2006; Walther, 2008). Instead, a greater number of friends allows for a wider level of relational connections in constituting the self. The users with a high number of friends will have further opportunities to develop the multiple versions of the self. It is not the number of friends itself designates a high social status but the ability constitute the self in a range of ways grants a greater opportunity to make sense of oneself.

Casual is in the process of re-making the self through the use of the profile changes. The default profile does not specify a new direction for the self but implies a stripping of the current version in order to begin anew. The power to create new subject positions is just rivalled by the ability remove them. As Casual's profile changes show, the current construction of the self does not require the MySpace user to be permanently accountable for the constructions in the past. Therefore, in the current status one could assume that Casual would not have to answer to his position in the previous profile (in the same way as Alo* Vera* was no longer accountable for his religious construction of the self after it had been changed). Even though the profiles appear static on the pages the felt experience of using the page is one of inherent multiplicity.

Paradoxically, Casual can no longer make sense of himself through the particular lad identity category. In studying Casual's page it is difficult to recognise a context for this change as there was little communication in other parts of the wall. What is clear is that MySpace users are able to live through the possibility of who they might be. Through the hoped-for version of the self they are able to experiment with who they can be in MySpace. Levinas (1969) insists how people who use their imagination end up leading better lives. This statement and is obviously not connected to the study of new media technologies, however, the underlying premise of this argument, that through trialling different versions of the self we are fundamentally able to lead better lives, is compelling given the data on offer in this chapter. What this demonstrates is that those who spend more time experimenting with the imaginative forms of the self in MySpace will have more opportunities to shape their experience at a social level. This adds further layers to the argument that a high amount of friends is the key to a successful use of MySpace.

The hoped-for self shows the everyday practice of constructing movement in the use of MySpace. In using the profile changes users are able to connect with a variety of imagined communities through the ability to shift the self into new domains. This involves using imaginative performance of new subject positions. Imagination is not about fantasies, about the real or virtual, online or offline; it is rather about the actual practice of constituting the self in a multiplicity of ways based on the typical practices of most communities. The use of profile changes provides a 'space for imagination to land' (Wenger, 1998: 217). Through the practice of changing the words and images on the page the users are able to structure a form of engagement where they can shape their continuing versions of the self in MySpace.

11.5 Chapter Summary

The chapter has shown how the way profile changes allow a MySpace user to maintain an ongoing project of hoped-for versions of the self. This has focused on the actual practices of the MySpace use and explored a rationale for the multiplicity of self constructions as an aspect of the shifting connections to an imagined sense of community. Hoped-for versions of the self are never actualised, or transformed into now version of the self, as they are part of a way of retaining the sense of multiplicity of the self. The majority of users do not want to cement their construction of the self as situated within one sense of community in order to allow for a higher potential to

communicate in the future. The hoped-for self shows the imaginative use of the self that is dedicated to identifying new connections in MySpace. In belonging to one community, the users instantly want to perform their membership in a way encourages a strong position in the group, one where they have the ability to shape the identity of the group as a whole. The visual constitution of the page is highly involved with the ability to communicate shifting forms of the self.

The practice of the hoped-for self is reflected in the common assumption that the main goal of SNS use is to have as many friends as possible. It appears that a high number of friends is important, but most importantly, as a way of making sense of oneself through the ability to forge a range of community connections. The self is managed at a social level a constructed within the ability to forge relational connections. To fashion ourselves in MySpace and other SNSs takes a great deal of skill, for example, in observing how the users in this chapter use identity claims as a way of performing a membership to a particular community is part of the process of the hoped-for self.

On a wider scale, the use of the hoped-for self provides a practice for creating new subjectivities. This relies on the mobilisation of other relational connections that could be recognised as 'external normatives' from the discussions in previous chapters. These normatives are not always of our own choosing as they relate to the available bodies of power/knowledge in any social engagement. However, the notion of external normatives intended to explain the complexity of the hoped-for self in terms of the actual, everyday practices of the self. This would consider self and subjectivity as the same thing. The hoped-for self focuses on the inherent ability to shape the self through the use of use of profile changes as a way of continuing the multiple performance of the self with reference to imagined social relations. The following chapter will continue to explore the use of profile changes in terms of the actual experience of constructing the hoped-for self.

Chapter 12:

The Self 'In Potential'

12.1 Introduction

The previous chapter identified the hoped-for self in the performance of profile changes. The hoped-for self describes the way users can explore possible futures through a range of connections that are based on a multiplicity of imagined relations. In this chapter the analysis will examine a set of profile changes where the MySpace user does not seem to orientate their profile to the hoped-for self in the same way. What does this mean for the construction of the hoped-for self? Is this user *not* constructing the self in the same way? This will continue to look at the profile changes and focus on the actual use of the site. Here is the screenshot of the first piece of data:
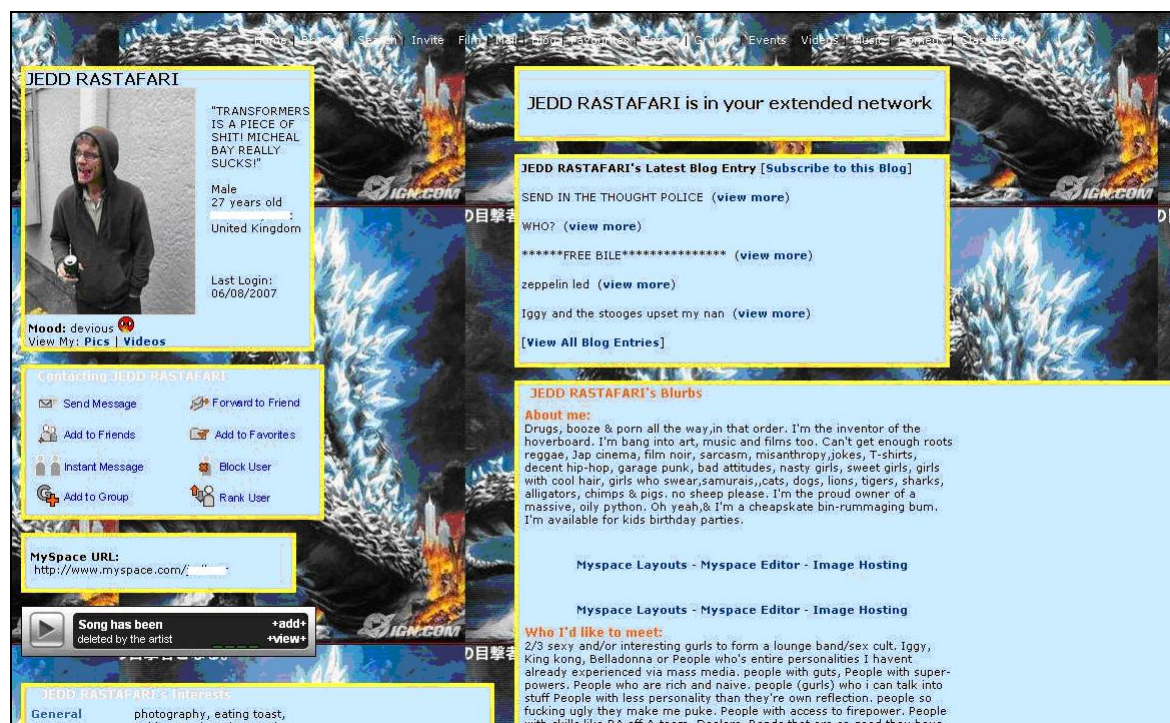
Extract 21. Screenshot of Jedd Rastafari's First Profile page

Extract 21 shows that Jedd Rastafari has a unique style that is a performance of individuality, which is predominant in sub-cultural rejections of western culture. Jedd likes everything that he shouldn't do, as he states in his blurb, 'Drugs, booze & porn all the way, in that order'. Jedd's profile constructs a dismissal of typical forms of MySpace behaviour, for example, the tag line on his profile reads 'Transformers is a piece of shit! Michael Bay really sucks'. Transformers being one the summer blockbusters of 2007 (the time at which the data was recorded) and would no doubt raise controversy with many avid transformer fans in MySpace. From the screenshot it can be seen that Jedd has a relatively small number of friends in his MySpace network (50 at the time of the first screenshot).

The visual layout of Jedd's page is one of a chaotic, electric-blue image that has been repeated numerous times to form the background. The visual aspects of the profile are highly developed and organised. Jedd has even selected a colour for the borders of the separate boxes on the page (yellow) which then matches the background image. The profile photograph shows a different form of photographic style to others that have featured in the analysis as there is no close-up image of Jedd, and instead, he is pictured standing holding a can of beer. The impact of this visual profile is one of an alternative performance to many of the profiling normatives that have featured in the previous analytic chapters.

Jedd Rastafari constructs the self (both visually and textually) as at a distance from the common assumptions of a MySpace user. For example, in his 'who I'd like to meet' section of his profile he lists 'people who's entire personalities I haven't already experienced through the mass media' and 'Bands that are so good they have to contact complete fucking strangers to get noticed'. This constructs the self as different from the media image of a typical MySpace. In the blurb he continues to comment on the way he 'dislikes' those people who have 'less personality than they're own reflection'. Jedd also criticises wider forms of computer-mediated communication, for example, he writes '[I dislike] people who use the expression lol and think its highly hip and amusing'.

Although, given the potential negative connotations of some of Jedd's comments, his profile construction is highly playful and light-hearted. For example, in the about me section of the profile Jedd lists his interests as 'sarcasm, misanthropy, jokes, T-Shirts, decent hip-hop, garage punk…'and a further array of seemingly unconnected words that constitute a playful form of the self. This construction of the

self continues into the general section of the profile where he writes that he enjoys 'photography' and 'eating toast'. These lists are typically place for a range of interests that include sporting interest or favourite television shows (e.g. many of the previous examples have listed sporting interests in this section of the profile). It is in this overall construction of the profile that the negative possibilities of the comments are lost. The construction of a playful self is most vividly seen in the line from his blurb that states 'I'm a cheapskate bin rummaging bum. I am available for kids birthday parties'. The discursive use of being 'available for kiddies parties' while also being a 'bin rummaging bum' construct the profile in a playful style.

Jedd still regularly engages with the MySpace practices (wall posting, photo uploading etc.) that are essential to interaction in the site. Therefore, his playful construction does not indicate that he does wants to oppose the use of MySpace. Presumably, were this the case, he what not visit the site at all. Jedd also uses a number of other wider media references to construct the profile (such as 'transformers'), even through his profile is against the influence of large companies and other media influences. Jedd constructs the profile in an anti-normative fashion, where the aspects of profiling have been intentionally opposed in the construction. However, Jedd is still able to use the profile in this way as a way of constructing the self.

Jedd mediates a network of friends through his construction of the self where he invokes a set of relational connections that emphasise a shared identity category of playfulness. This construction can be seen as another way of performing a hoped-for version of the self. This shows an imaginative construction of the self that speaks to another way of addressing the multiple forms of communities in MySpace. This construction of his profile is continued into other aspects of the blog, for example, the following screenshot is one of the blogs from his profile page entitled 'send in the thought police'.

Extract 22. Screenshot of Jedd Rastafari's blog post

Extract 22 continues the construction of the playful self through a narrative that
explains his views on potential employers viewing MySpace pages. In this blog Jedd
writes '[this is like people] coming round your house to make sure you've got the
appropriate fucking curtains?!' This blog develops the narrative from the profile
which identifies MySpace as unserious space where checking you have the
'appropriate fucking curtains' is a joke about the issues of surveillance. Furthermore,
this blog serves as a way to continue the narrative of the main profile page. Jedd is
once more performing a provocative from of communication where he finishes the
blog with the line 'I need a boss like I need tastebuds in my arsehole'.

  For many MySpace users, talk of employers wishing to view the profile pages is
typically left out of everyday communication. Again, Jedd is toying with the media
interpretation of the site and invoking a satirical stance on the use of MySpace. In
reaction to this blog there is only the one singular reply from 'Angelyn Jolly' who
states 'that was awesome...' Although this blog is relatively short, it appears to
support the sentiment in Jedd's blog and maintain this construction of the self. The
benefit of using the profile in this way is that it avoids the need to constant shift the
self to new forms of imagined communities (that was identified in the previous
chapter). In this profile mode, Jedd is deliberately countering many of the norms of
profiling that would include the need to update the profile regularly.

Jedd imagines a community of like-minded MySpace users who want to connect around a similar jovial use of MySpace. This is evidenced in his desire to meet users have the same approach to MySpace usage, which is evidenced in a line taken from his 'who I'd like to meet section'; '[I would like to meet] people's whose entire personalities I haven't met via the mass media'. This shows that Jedd imagines a community of users that could be connected by a similar approach to MySpace use. In many ways Jedd's actions act into an 'already-constituted' world in a way that still provides an opportunity to construct the self through a set of imagined connections. In the following changes the aim is identify if Jedd's profile contributes to the notion of the hoped-for self.
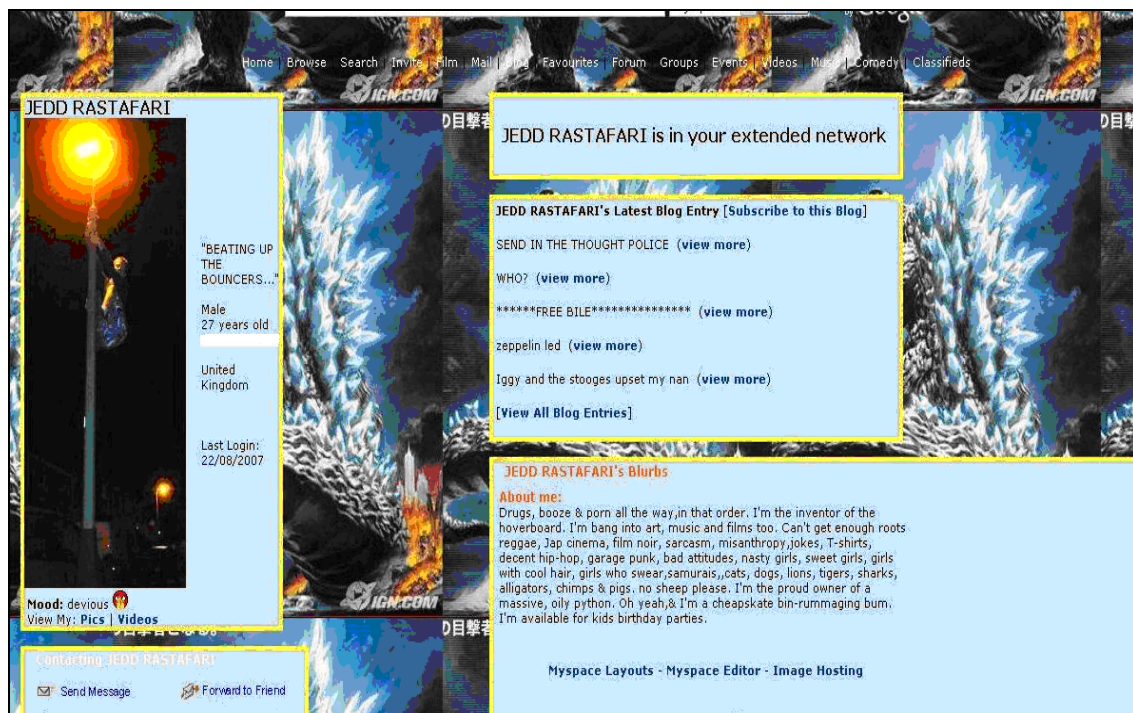
Extract 23. Screenshot of Jedd Rastafari's Second profile page

Extract 23 shows that Jedd has only made a small set of changes to his profile. The most noticeable is the introduction of a new profile photograph. This photograph depicts someone (presumably Jedd) climbing a lamp post late at night. The photograph, like in the previous profile, does not fit the typical MySpace conventions that would typically be a close-up image of the user using one of select amount of styles (e.g. a passport style image or taken using a webcam). The size of the image dominates the new profile page and physically distorts the use of the page. Moreover,

the content of the photograph is unlike any other that has been encountered in this analysis. In terms of the textual changes to the page, Jedd's display name has been changed from 'Transformers is a piece of shit…' to a similarly taunting line 'beating up the bouncers'. Both the visual and the textual aspects of the page continue the playful construction of the self and show no intention to modifying the construction of the self in the new profile. This could indicate that this data is an exception to the notion of the hoped-for self.

However, the earlier stages of the analysis identified that the playful use of Jedd's profile may extend to the traditional practices of profile changing. Jedd Rastafari could be avoiding any such profile changes even if they are (potentially) available to him. There is no new attempt to shift the self away from the playful construction in the first profile. Given the previous findings, it is possible to conclude that Jedd may avoid connecting the self as one of a particular mediated community is order to avoid a sense of accountability. This relates to the previous findings where the construction of the self is linked to a need to demonstrate a continued membership to a particular community (following the work of Shotter, 1989,1993a). Therefore, the playful construction of the profile would avoid any possibilities of accountability and reduces the amount of effort involved with maintaining a profile.

It is also important to remember that this could be another example of the hoped-for self in action. The previous extracts showed how the construction took a few profile changes before the self changed direction. Jedd may actually change this way of constructing the self in the future and the issues here is that the profile pages should not be treated as a static or fixed entity. The decision to keep the profile in an open direction shows that these distinctions should not be placed on linear continuum (as with the work of Markus & Nurius, 1986). Therefore, the hoped-for self will not become actualised as it represents the multiplicity of the self and not all MySpace users will construct the hoped-for self in the same way (as shown in this chapter). However, through the use of profile changes all users maintain a relationship to the potential of re-making the self. Jedd Rastafari shows the ability to construct the hoped-for self through a playful rejection of cultural practices in MySpace. The following extract further explores this claim in a set of changes that again seem to position support the alternative approach to profile changing in MySpace.

12.2 'I'd hate to be like you'

Extract 24. Screenshot of Julia's first profile page

Extract 24 shows further evidence of a playful profile construction. In this profile Julia's display name reads 'How I'd hate to be like you'. This is presumably aimed at the rest of MySpace as it is positioned in the main title of the profile. She also writes in her blurb 'I am opinionated – but that doesn't make me a bad person, and I'm not fake, but I just can't be…but then again how many times on this site do you hear people quote that'. The use of the marker 'on this site' appears to be of interactional significance as she is positioning herself as somehow different to the other members of the community that personify this claim. Her blurb begins with the question 'where does anyone start when having to talk about themselves??' This is uncharacteristic of most MySpace users who enjoy numerous opportunities to talk about themselves. Julia also uses the profile to construct the self that is playful with MySpace practices; 'and I'm not fake, how can I be…but then how many times on this site do you hear people quote that'. As with Jedd Rastafari, the refusal to construct the profile in a traditional sense creates another way of constructing the self.

The construction of this form of self requires a continuation of this performance in all aspects of the profile. Even if the content of the profile may appear different to the other in MySpace there are some basic features of the profile page that remain the same (such as performing the changes in all aspects of the page). The performance of this profile is one that has a construction of the self that is intentionally positioned as being different to the rest of the users in MySpace. However, the profile is still able to achieve the same construction of the self through a relational connection with an imagined community. The following changes were made to Julia's profile:
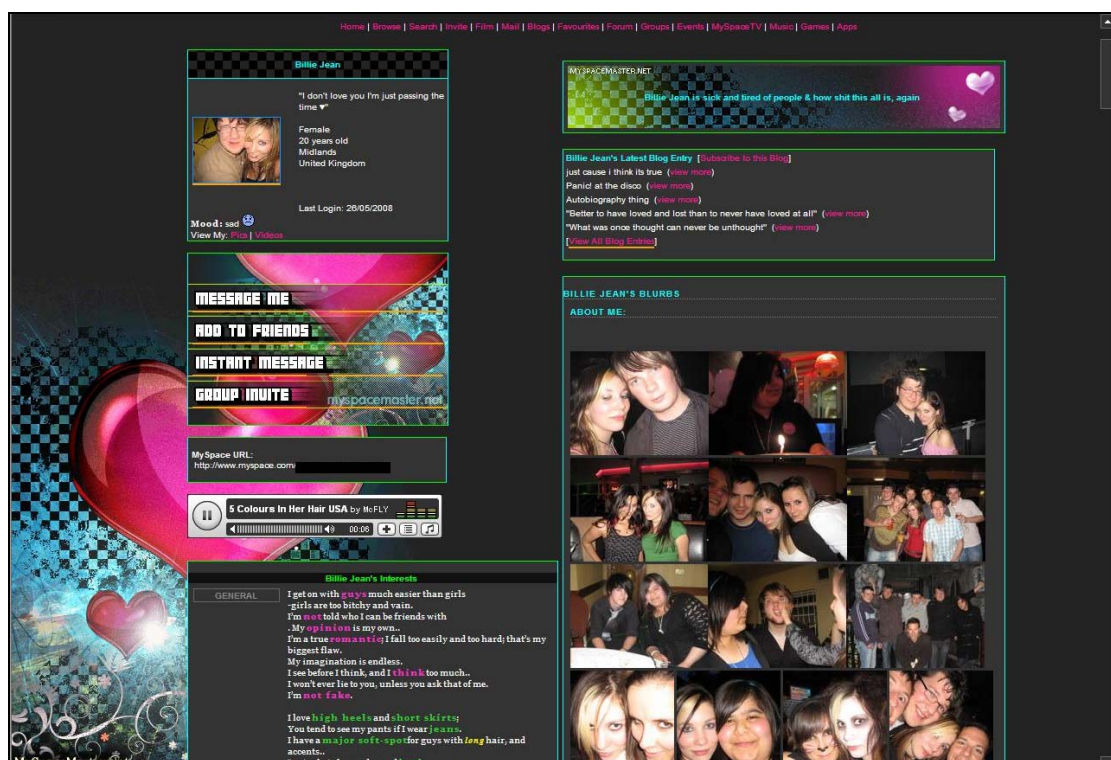
Extract 25. Screenshot of Julia's Second Profile Page.

Extract 25 shows the continuation of the playful construction of the self in the first profile as Julia has changed her display name to 'I don't love you I'm just passing the time'. Again, this performs a distance from the perceived audience as with the previous display name. However, the most notable change to the profile is the addition of a number of photographs to the profile page. The blurb (which previously included the line 'where does anyone start when having to talk about themselves') has been replaced with a collage of photographs which cycle through a number of different images in a slideshow format. These photographs include a number of

photographs of Julia (matched to the profile photograph) in a range of venues with a variety of different people.

It is here where, even if, the textual aspects of the page demonstrates how Julia 'hates' to be like other members of MySpace, an increased level of relational connections is managed through the visual aspects of the page. The hoped-for self is organised through the modification of the visual aspects of the change. The visual is able to constitute Julia as relationally connected. Through the use of photographs Julia is able to perform the self in a way that develops a number of hoped-for, possible connections. In each photograph she is able to make sense of herself through the implied connection. Therefore, the visual use of the profile balances-out the ineffective use of the textual aspects of the page. Julia's new profile page is no longer constituted through a rejection of the profile norms as they have been mediated through the visual aspects of the page. This bolsters her relational connections through the community implications of the photographs. Her main profile photograph has also changed to accentuate her relationship to the photographs in the other part of the page. In changing the main photograph the different aspects of the profile correspond to an increased sense of unity across the page as a whole.

Extracts 21-25 show how the hoped-for version of the self is not only limited to a simple action of continually updating the profile. MySpace users have a ranger of alternative practices to constitute the self and once could argue that every MySpace member user has the ability to form a relationship with the self in MySpace. The multiple forms of the self require the need for constant change that is achieved through the imaginative use of the profile changes. Profile changes are a pivotal feature of this function as when other users look at a profile they expect to see that there has been some degree of change or movement. This is contrasted to the way that pages are actually motionless and there is a sense of continuity that is sculpted into the profile changes. The hoped-for self is understood in terms of a current trajectory and other users will be drawn to the see how the self is being constituted in this way.

It can be argued that the moment a MySpace user constitutes the self in MySpace they are responsible to keep it moving and changing, just as the self would expect to be performed in real life situations. The use of profile changing aids this continuation of the self as it offers an opportunity to directly invoke imagined relations. It may also be for this reason why users have been found to rarely delete a MySpace page even if they recognise that they have been unable to tend to their

profile frequently (Livingstone, 2008). The self is always 'in potential' and never finished both online and offline. This concept will be explored in light of some postmodern theorising on the topic.

12.3 The Self 'in Potential'

In *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988) Baudrillard speaks of a shift towards using modern forms of technology as a way of presenting the self. Baudrillard conceives a space where most people are so heavily interested in their own appearance that others almost cease to exist. For Baudrillard, the rise of different forms of communication technology offers the opportunity for an individual to constantly reproduce themselves. Baudrillard (1988: 29) writes, 'what matters above everything else is proving our existence, even if that is its only meaning'. From this perspective, communication facilitates a basic, emotionally disconnected relationship where someone is obliged to accept the existence of another. It is merely demonstrating that 'I am here'. Consider the following passage from Baudrillard (1988: 40-41):

> Formerly we were haunted by the fear of resembling others, of losing ourselves in a crowd; afraid of conformity, and obsessed with difference. Today, we need a solution to deliver us from resembling others. All that matters now is to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyalty to one's personal formula; to see the same credit listings everywhere, be on all the movie screens at once.

Baudrillard identifies the way modern technology seems to be littered with vast amount of unnecessary communication that is dedicated to our own sense of uniqueness. In a similar vein, some view the communication in new technologies as a form of 'phatic communion' (derived from Malinowski, 1923). The argument here is that the communication in many new media technologies (like that of MySpace) generates a vast amount of vacuous, unnecessary forms of communication. In looking at the use subtle additions of text in the profile changes from the previous chapter (most poignantly, in the wall) there is a sense that a great deal of the communication is empty in sentiment and does little to contribute to the experience.

However, the notion of the hoped-for self indicates that new technologies may not signal the *death of expression* as Baudrillard states. In MySpace, the vast amounts of communication are necessary to the construction of the self. Even if, many of the pieces of information that are added to the profile page or included in a blog may not appear to be direct communication, there is a desired connection with an imagined form of community that requires a constant sense of movement. Each tiny piece of communication is part of the numerous trials of the self in MySpace. The analysis of the profile changes shows that there is a need to keep the self in a state of motion, where for this task, the use of profile changes has a central role. The constant uploading of new information provides the means for this continuity. The self in this context will be explored as 'in potential'. The continuous amount of information added to the site is a way of keeping the self hoped-for and in motion. This issue will be explored through the profile changes of the MySpace user Steve Trammons. The following is a screenshot of Steve's first profile page in the sequence.

Extract 26. Screenshot of Steve Trammons' first profile page

Extract 26 shows the profile of Steve Trammons. Steve has a technically confident profile with a range of music videos, interactive graphics and other applications. He has also chosen to 'pimp' his profile through the use of another website. The profile page is outfitted with a desert style with graphic that could easily be taken from a war based video game. Steve has over 250 friends. The profile picture shows Steve lounging in a pub or restaurant with another male. Steve's tag line reads: 'those that matter don't mind, and those that mind don't matter'. Steve has a youthful character that can be seen in his performance of a 'restless' mood selection and the association with a youth culture of 'emo' punk rock music (through bands such as *INME*, *Reuben* and *Enter Shikari*). His song player bursts out 'Medusa' by *Bring me the Horizon* when the profile page is opened. The musical aspect of Steve's profile is clearly well-crafted and acts a way of performing a particular construction of the self.

The beginning of Steve's blurb reads 'Skate all day, skate for miles. A skateboard brings many smiles'. In the blurb begins 'I'm Steve Trammons' which is rare considering the way most MySpace users introduce themselves through more abstract methods (by stating their favourite interests for example). The blurb constructs a philosophical turn when it continues 'music is in the soul, and tells my life like a book'. To the casual observer it appears that Steve Trammons frequently visits his page to his share statements of this kind. Steve is clearly performing a thoughtful and contemplative construction of the self.

However, given the sober performance of some of the text there is still a positive construction of the profile through the visual constitution of the page. The profile photograph appears to have entertaining connotations that detracts from the construction of the discourse which emphasises being 'stuck in a rut'. The background has been customised to give a light-hearted performance to the visual aspects of the page. In the blurb Steve writes 'I just hope the right things happen to me to determine my future'. This shows that the hoped-for the self is not formulated in one particular direction or another, just through the construction of a generic vagueness relating to the 'right things'. This is similar to Jane's profile (Extract 10-13) where the profile did not orientate to the change itself but performed an issue to be later changed (the construction of 'sadness' for example). Here, Steve is incorporating a sense of movement into the construction of his profile.

There is then a performance of openness to Steve's profile that welcomes the possibility of change. The profile has a direct relationship to his working career as he writes, 'I'd like to get things moving within the next year, because I h8 being stuck in a rut at the moment'. This construction performs a changing self where the narrative is set up by the author and there is openness to the change, as has been the case with all the extracts in this chapter, in a way that is essential to practice of the hoped-for self. For this, the imagined sense of community creates a space to connect with the appreciation of his desire to 'move forward'. Let us consider the changes Steve makes to his profile.
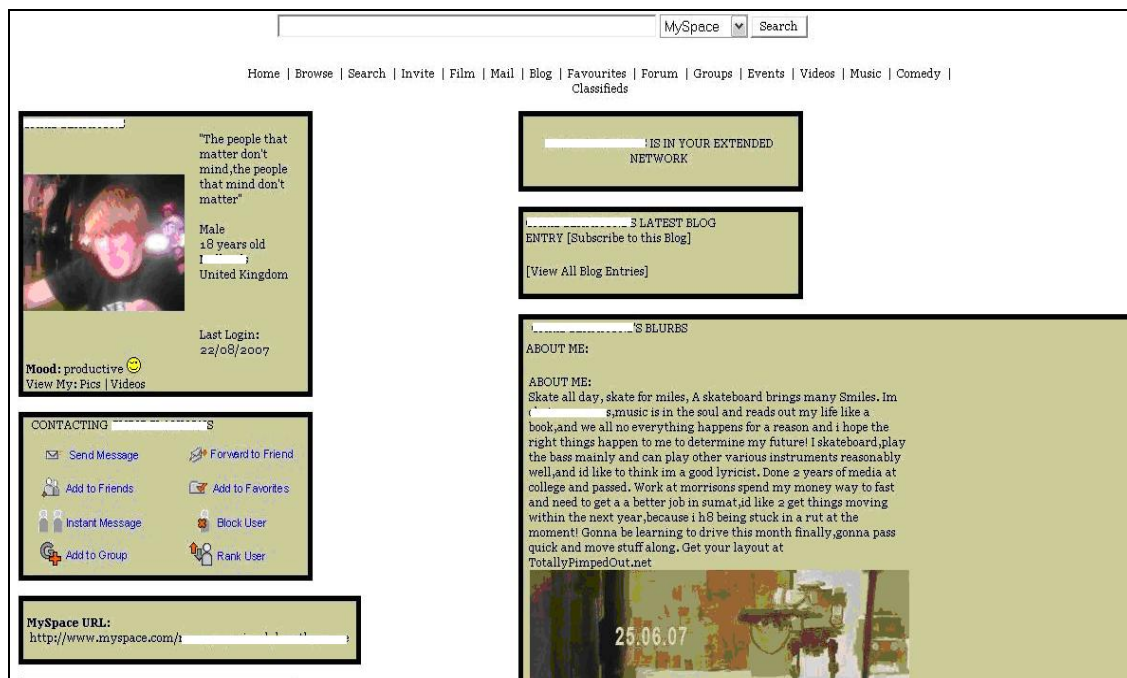
Extract 27. Screenshot of Steve Trammons' second profile page.

Extract 27 shows that Steve has changed his profile photograph. The new photograph experiments with a different form of photographic style, one where Steve uses a self taken shot that has been distorted by some kind of photographic effect. In the background of the photograph there appears to be a large crowd that indicates that this could have been taken at a recent party or a gig. The new picture shows him close to the camera, toying with the creation of the photograph. Notice that Steve's mood is now 'productive' as opposed to 'restless' in the earlier profile. This immediately

aligns with the narrative structure from the original profile where there was a desire to construct the 'right things'. The changes are constituted in relation to the potential of an imagined community.

Steve has added to his blurb 'gonna be learning to drive this month finally, gonna pass quick and move stuff along'. This subtle addition of this text is related to the potential from the previous profile. Where he was before 'stuck in a rut' he is now 'moving things along'. The narrative construction produces a hoped-for version of self. This is similar to the use of Jane's profile changes (Extract 11-13) where her mood status shifted from 'sad' to 'happy' in the profile changes. The potential is constituted in the specific use of the profile. This does not mean that Steve, or for that matter Jane, is now 'happy' and that the profile need no further changes. The narrative is in-built to keep the profile moving and the content of the changes will never be finished.

The self is to some extent is always hoped-for as it is constantly moving and shifting. This involves multiple sets of imagined relations from which the user makes sense of different connective capabilities. To aid this performance there is a need to set the changes into a background of shared vernacular that will invoke a shared community presence. For Steve, the construction of the self is directed towards the 'right things' as a way of invoking Steve's imagined sense community. Therefore, all of the constructions of self MySpace are to some extent hoped-for due to the multiple connections to range of mediated communities. This need for a narrative, shared vernacular demonstrates the way the self has to be kept in movement in MySpace. The constant realigning the different hoped-for version of the self in the profile changes is one of the core ways that MySpace users achieve this movement.

The constantly changing construction of the self requires practices like the hoped-for self to instil movement and change. In this state the profile can be called upon at any moment to make sense of ourselves. Every profile change has the *potential* to construct the self in some way and relates to wider need for movement and process. The profile changes are pivotal to the mediation of the self and the potential is the stored up in the profile. The work that Steve Trammons has put into constructing the narrative in his profile will allow different formations of the hoped-for self to be mobilised in the future. It is this way that explores possible range of experience. The final of Steve Trammons' profiles will further evidence these claims.

Extract 28. Screenshot of Steve Trammons' third profile page

Extract 28 shows the final of Steve Trammons' profile changes. This profile page shows that the self is continuing to be hoped-for through the way that Steve constitutes the self as ongoing and in motion. In looking at the specific part of the blurb that has been previously changed (referring to the 'right things' and leaning to drive), in this profile change Steve writes that he is 'currently looking for a new job as hated the old'. The discourse around learning to drive and going to college have been removed and replaced with the focus on finding a new job. Therefore, the sense of actualisation in the last profile has been reverted back to a position that implies openness and ambiguity. What is particularly noteworthy is that the previous constructions of the self do not need to be referred to in these new changes. There is no need for Steve to explain his decision to remove the discourse around returning to college or of learning to drive as this is lost in the transition to the new profile.

The past profile changes are also considered to be collectively accessible the imagined community. Steve positions these changes as if the communities have some knowledge of his recent direction of the profile. There is a disparity across different aspects of the page in the way that the past become archived: for the wall section of the page the past information is stored-up alongside the current communication,

whereas in terms of profile changing, the earlier profiles disappear once they have been changed. However, given the difference between these two practices, the actual use is comparable in nature. MySpace users experience a sense of how the profiles appeared in the past and the profiles are constructed as if the community is aware of earlier profiles even though there is no physical evidence store available to other users.

In following the work of Baudrillard outlined at the beginning of this chapter there is the possibility that the communication in MySpace is leading to the *death of expression.* Here the main object of the communication would be to prove to a selection of onlooker that 'I am here'. For Baudrillard, the obscenity of modern communication is due to the colossal amount of wasteful communication that is directed towards merely recognising that one exists (see also Massumi et al., 2007). The early stages of this analysis were able to refute this claim based on the multitude of communication patterns that were necessary to maintain the hoped-for construction of the self. In light of the previous data, this interpretation can be taken a stage further to explain the way that being recognised by others is not just an essential quality of like through new media technologies but in actual practice provides much more than the earlier use of the term would lead to believe. To cite William James (1890: 293-294):

> If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead' and acted if we were nonexistent things we would not be the selves we are today.

This quote shows the importance of being recognised by others. The purpose of the hoped-for self and other forms of profiling norms could be seen as a signal to the mediated community "look at me - I am here", or even, "look at me – I am *still* here". The constant amount of changes to the profile constitute the multiple forms of the self and acts as a way of communicating one's continued presence in MySpace. Levinas (1987) argues that the face of the other is 'indeclinable' and an attempt to communicate cannot be ignored by others. Although, Levinas and other theorists would have been dealing a wider state of issues as opposed to the interaction in new technologies, the use of this literature offers a way of conceptualising interaction in this new environment. The concept that without interaction we would 'not be the

selves we are today' supports the guiding premise of this data that that the MySpace users are able to make sense of themselves through their connections with other members. For Steve Trammons, the slight changes to his profile continue his presence in MySpace.

Even though the narrative in the profile is not always answered by another MySpace user it still manages to constitute experience from the perceived connection with other community members. This is different to the situation James is describing in the above quote as his concept of being recognised relies on an actual response from others. The members of a mediated community in MySpace do not have to respond to the changes that someone makes to a profile - even if the communication implies a direct response (take for example the display name in Jane's profile 'can you make me feel like a star?'). The difference is that there is the perceived possibility of a response. There is a *potential* to communicate.

The work of Levinas can be used to further explore this concept. Levinas (1996) argues that the more that subjectivity knows of its reality and the ways that it can assume power over that subjectivity, then the less that it can retain a sense of uniqueness. Even though this is a statement about the wider function of subjectivity, it still has implications for the everyday construction of the self. The ability to demonstrate 'I am still here' always leads people to want to know more about themselves (this idea is also replicated in some of Butler's work). Therefore, when someone knows something of themselves (that they are 'here') this will always lead them to want to know more. Even if, one was ever able to state that they were just 'here', the ability to perform such an act leads to some form of knowing, and once a relationship with the 'here' has been established, the individual is responsible for the actions that occur in the future. This finding was identified in the analysis through the way the first construction of the self in a profile would require the user to keep the self in motion. The profile needs to not only be 'here' but it also has to be seen to be going 'there'. Furthermore, 'here' and 'there' are continuously being redefined through action and the activity in MySpace never demonstrates that the user is *only* 'here'.

For Steve Trammons, the slight changes to his profile have the potential to be a part of a wider form of communication. The profile changes are one of the main sites of activity and relate to the way that the self is never finished or complete. This will obviously cause a high amount of surplus communication. However, it would be difficult to suggest this communication is inherently wasteful, due to the subtle

complexity of meaning that can be derived from the changes to a profile. From the data in this chapter, even the slightest change to the profile has implications for the construction of the self. MySpace users perform a timeless character in their MySpace profiles by constantly constructing, moment by moment, the multiple possibilities of future forms of the self.

12.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter continues looking at the use of profile change in MySpace and began by the looking at the example of Jedd Rastafari who represented the possibility that the hoped-for self was not a practice that all users employed. Indeed, this analysis emphasised the alternative ways of using the MySpace profile, but ultimately formed another way of performing a hoped-for version of the self. In doing so, Jedd Rastafari constitutes the self in a way that is playful and mischievous, but fundamentally, still another way of constructing the hoped-for self. Extract 24 replicates the findings of a playful approach to profiling practices and shows how the visual aspects of the page could be used to counter a lack of textual references to relational connections. In this set of profile changes, Julia was able to gain an experience of her relational connections through the deployment of photographs in her profile changes.

Extract 26 explores the hoped-for self in terms of a narrative in the profile changes. This narrative supplies a constant way of maintaining the self as always changing and maps to the multiplicity of self. This counters the argument that there is direct path between the hoped-for self and the 'now' self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The self is then 'in potential' as the process of the hoped-for self tries to mediate a number different of relational connections. MySpace users are able to constitute an essential need for movement in the self through the action of the profile changes. This enables the users to make sense of themselves through the changes they make to the profile and other forms of communication on the page.

However, despite this multiplicity, the self still appears as coherent whole in the MySpace profile. This is because the self is process that does not allow for a spatial comparison, and therefore, the self in potential performs the multiple possibilities of the self without presenting a sense of division. In both of the chapters exploring the use of profile change the analysis of the hoped-for self shows how the users are able to experience a variety of community memberships without incorporating a sense of division or separation.

The final aspects of the chapter explored the claims that profile changes and other forms of communication in MySpace represent noting more than a continued recognition of existence. For Baudrillard, the demonstration of existence is characteristic of the modern forms of wastefulness that that are abundant in modern society. However, the constitution of the hoped-for self has shown how even the smallest change to the profile page is able to communicate something of the self in potential. Therefore, the profile changes have the capacity to simply demonstrate that 'I am still here' at a basic level, however, the ability to construct the self in this way automatically invokes the user to continue the performance of the self. This shows a complex issue of movement and continuity that relates to the function of the profile changes in MySpace.

Chapter 13:

Conclusions

13.1 Main Conclusions

MySpace is a social network site where every day millions of users log-on to check their personal profiles and communicate with other members. It is a modern form of communication that presents an opportunity to explore issues of self, identity and community. Each of these topics has a contested history in social psychology that can be further explored by applying these terms to new forms of communication. This thesis utilises a constructionist approach that benefits from new dialectics of process, movement and multiplicity. The research provides an alternative approach to the predominant use of experimental or sociological research traditions in the investigation of online phenomena. This focuses on the actual embodied experience of using MySpace.

   This thesis shows that the Internet is not automatically a space for leading a separate, *virtual* life. Each MySpace member is confronted with the task of constructing the self through the different aspects of the site (wall posting, blogging, profile changing etc.). This construction requires the constant negotiation of the relation to other community members in MySpace. This shows that difference between online and offline, public and private, MySpace or 'your' space, instantly dissolve at the point of communication. The communication mediates the self in such a way that it carries a feeling of connection which is not separable to an offline space or other mode of experience. The negotiation of relational connections carves-out a space for the self through the communication with other users. It is through this experience of forging connections that users are able to make sense of who they can be in MySpace. Therefore, this thesis shows that MySpace is not an opportunity to role-play with different presentations of the self, or even to *reinvent* the self, due to the way it is entirely mediated.

This thesis shows that the self is *mediated* through the use of MySpace. This explains the joint constitution of the self through the different forms of communication in MySpace. The notion of a *mediated community* describes the creation of a shared sense of connection that is located in the use of language and other symbolic systems. Mediated community is a sense of interconnectedness that emerges from a perceived amount of social ties and a shared emotional content. The mediated community is shown to have an *imagined* dimension in the way that MySpace users maintain a perceived set of relations. The notion of mediated community resurfaced in each analytic chapter as one of the guiding principles in the communicative practices. The notion of mediation is able to access the embodied experience of using MySpace.

The thesis focuses on the everyday function of the self in MySpace. It finds that all actions in MySpace have the potential to be communication and that each user has the potential to build a relation with the self. In every aspects of the site, the negotiation of relational connection is a central component to the ability to construct the self. It is through the imagined connections with others that the self is constituted and performed. This difference between offline and online is delicately interwoven in the way that the self is constructed in the interactions with others. The formation of the self is one if inherent multiplicity and performance that immediately explodes the narrow boxes on the page. The static information in the profile page is juxtaposed to the intersecting forms of imaginative constructions of the self that comes from the embodied use of the site.

The sense of movement in the construction of the self is one of the central findings of this thesis. In each form of communication, the mediation of relational connection is aimed to keep the performance of the self in motion. This is most poignantly shown in the *hoped-for* function of the self that shows a resistance to a sense of totality in the collective formation of the self. One outcome of this continual sense of movement is the need to continually redefine the current status of the MySpace relations, even for those members who have an offline connection. The ever-changing shape of MySpace requires the negotiation and re-negotiation of the self. The self is constantly *in potential*.

The wider notion of subjectivity featured through the analysis of the blogging data. This showed that the reflective function of the blog could mobilise a discussion on subjectivity and explore the possibility of a blog as a confession. This opposes the

widely recognised definition of a self-disclosure as an explanation for the use of the blog. In this chapter the analysis focused on the reflective power of the blog which gave the MySpace users the ability to directly turn and look at themselves. The *brand me* explained the process of creating new subjectivities through the realisation of other normative influences in the form of relational connections. The brand me shows how the MySpace users can access an experience of what they could be as subjects (as opposed to what they are as selves) through the ability to reflectively look at how they are connected in MySpace. This took a Foucauldian point of view to explore the structures of power/knowledge that shaped available normatives. The brand me also related to the unique selling point of the profile and how the production of the *me* in the profile could be re-branded to give a new basis for connection. In this data new subjectivities materialise through the mediation of new social and cultural relations.

The later aspects of the thesis returned to the everyday function of the self and show how every aspect of communication has the potential to construct the self. This rejected the possibility that new SNSs represent the *death of expression* (Baudrillard, 1988) due to the need to constantly keep communicating in MySpace. To create the self in MySpace has the automatic impact of recruiting the user to feel invested in the mediated version of the self. It is also this feeling that guides the need to keep the self in a state of motion. The self in the profile must not appear to be 'standing still'. It is through the use of different connections that the user is able to keep the self moving, by constantly moving in and out of different mediated communities. The next section will allow for more specific findings of the self and identity to be reviewed.

13.2 The Self and Identity in MySpace

Issues of self and identity have been ongoing throughout this thesis. Both of these terms is found to be constituted at a relational level, however, there are still noticeable differences between these two terms. The analysis has particularly focused on the notion of the self in everyday communication. In building a profile page, the MySpace users are constructing the self in light of an imagined presence of others. The self is not simply produced in any form that one may wish, as this thesis has shown, but that the self is constantly being negotiated with an actual and perceived level of community. MySpace users are able to shape (and be shaped by) their connection to a shared sense of community.

The relational self first in the practice of wall posting shows how the experience of MySpace was constructed through the connections with others. This chapter showed the first signs of the multiple self in action. The *two post phenomenon* describes a function for initiating (or re-initiating) communication on the wall that uses two or more posts to distort conventional sequencing patterns. This practice is able to invoked a potential community awareness and encourage the possibility of a response. This practice is useful to members who are managing the communication just online and those who mediate an existing form of online relation. It shows that is not just the language itself that can impact on the construction of the self.

The analysis of the wall posting data shows a secondary function to the continually shifting relations in MySpace. For many users this multiplicity causes a disparity between the practice of becoming friends and a lack of interactional closeness. For many members, the experience of mediation of relational connections is balanced with an equal sense of distance and detachment. In the wall posting data MySpace users were shown to mange many of their connections by keeping them a peripheral level. It could be due to the continually re-shaping of the social relations that this form of interaction is a way of managing this multiplicity at a social level. This finding replicates the notion of 'interiority without intimacy' (Lury, 1997).

The notion of identity is shown to be an everyday practice of mediating certain identity categories in the use of different MySpace practices. Identity is shown to be tied to the issue of place in MySpace. This is connected to the concept of the mediated community and the way that users can discursively construct a connection with place as a way of performing identity. Through conversations in the wall, users are able to *spatialise* a shared sense of connection. Identity is performed through orientations to a particular membership category. The use of place-identities is able to locate a member within a community by invoking a shared experience of place. This causes new variations of relational connections that do not render any spaces, places or objects within a static materiality.

The practice of profile changing recognised the function of the *hoped-for self*. The act of profile changing is found to be one of the central aspects of MySpace activity (both through qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis). The profile changes identified the practice of the hoped-for self where MySpace users act into the mediated community with multiple versions of the self in order to keep the self going. This does not set a path between the hoped-for and the 'now' self (as in the work of

Markus & Nurius, 1986) but keeps the construction of the self locked in a state of continuity and flux. This requires the imaginative formation of a number of selves in the profile. This implies that that those MySpace users who continue to trial new forms of the self will ultimately have more success in MySpace. This success could be seen as an increased level of communication or the ability to gain a better experience from their MySpace use.

Trialing the different versions of the self leads to a complex form of experience that is constantly shaped by the current version of the self. Nigel Thrift refers to the way that the potential always exceeds the virtual in what he calls the 'readiness potential' of modern spaces (Thrift, 2008). The skill in MySpace is the ability to manage this need to appear in a continuous state of change – to mange this 'potential'. This will involve imaginative ways to keep the profile open to communication and find new ways to connect with different members. The different forms of 'readiness potential' are distributed across the different connections in MySpace. This continues the findings of a statistical nature that suggest the more friends in MySpace results in a higher level of social status. The status is actually derived from the connections that these friends represent and the multiple opportunities that their friendship can be played-out in MySpace.

This shows how the self must not appear to be finished or complete in MySpace. This connections with a wider notion of the foundation of communication where Brown and Stenner (2009: 199) argue that 'we must reflexively create our own foundations'. The foundation in MySpace is not in communication, language, or any other form of material environment – it is how all these things come together in the mediated act of constructing the self. All social interactions in MySpace are forged in the way that users *create* their own sense of foundation. However, as similarly argued by Brown and Stenner, there are still certain parameters for this non-foundationalism that impacts on our experience. For MySpace users, the ever-present feeling of the other community members forms a set of parameters in the construction of their experience. In the constant negotiation of different relational connections the MySpace users are straddling the difference between creativity and those specific parameters.

13.3 The Visual and the Textual

One of the additional findings from this thesis is the importance of the visual aspects of the profile page. This thesis shows that the visual and textual aspects of the page work collaboratively as part of the communication in MySpace. However, in many forms of Internet research, and admittedly in parts of this research, the visual and the textual are treated a separate modes of communication. By way of a conclusion, there is the need to consider the visual and the textual aspects of the communication as part of a coherent whole. The power of the visual is shown in parts of the analysis that did not explicitly focus on the visual but still managed to communicate a visual presence in the data (e.g. the users talking about the last time they saw the cereal bowl in Extract 4). The visual and the textual perform a multiplicity in MySpace that cannot be understood as distinct entities.

The use of the profile photograph was found to be at the centre of the visual constitution of the page. The selection of a particular photograph could be used to signal changes to other areas of the profile or an overall shift in the direction of the self. For example, if a user was to begin the self in a new mediated community (meaning trying to communicate with a group of people that in MySpace that they had not before) the use of the profile photograph could be used to demonstrate a set of identity claims that belongs to that group. This could even be a photograph with the community members themselves. In many examples the need to orientate towards a particular identity could be achieved by showing a connection through the profile photograph. The photograph signals that the profile is one that belongs to a particular group and any following interactions should be treated as such.

The switching between different mediated communities could also be met with large-scale changes to the profile background (e.g. in the profile changes of Alo*Vera*; Extract 14-15). The visuality of the background image is a powerful tool for the MySpace user. It is not only one of the main features of the profile page itself but it is at the backbone of the communication practices. As the users are swapping back and forth across each other's pages (to leave a comment on the wall, for example) they are constantly confronted with the background image. Therefore, even if the users do not actively look at the background of the page it is part of the communication. The constitution of the self is played-out in both visual and the

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textual aspects of the page. This is highlighted in the work that identifies the function of both visuality and textuality in MySpace pages (see Goodings & Brown, in press).

Visual and textual aspects of the page are fundamentally unstable on their own and it is through communication that the two are balanced. Thus, they form a multiplicity in which they must be understood. Expression in MySpace produces a distinct composition of the visual and textual that promotes a particular constitution of the self. This constitution has to be marked in both the words and images. For example, in Chapter 8, Sally explained (in her conversation with Dave) that she had recently decided to begin a career in modelling. Sally's profile exhibited a visual component of professionally taken photographs and other such images. The impact of this visual photographs support the claims on a discursive level.

The multiplicity of the visual and the textual is most vividly demonstrated by Foucault in *This Is Not A Pipe* (1982). Here, Foucault shows the relationship between the visual and the textual in a painting by René Magritte. The painting shows a clear picture of a pipe and then underneath the depiction of the words ceci n'est pas une pipe (this is not a pipe). Foucault is exposing our conceptions of things and signs to show that both the language and the visual can be treated as instances of power. They exist in a multiplicity where there is no resolution to the differences between the words and the image of the pipe – this clearly is a pipe, but not in the way that one could pick it up and smoke it (for further discussion, see Brown, 2001; Brown & Stenner, 2009). It is precisely the unsteadiness between the visual and the textual that Foucault is able to point to in Magritte's painting. Foucault argues that the words should not be understood as in direct opposition to images. Rather, that is about the mixing of different elements, of words and things, of multiplicities. This means that any explanation of MySpace should include a discussion of the visual aspects of the profile. Furthermore, it should focus on the multiplicities which enable both the visual and the textual to hang together.

13.4 Possible Futures

The visual aspects of SNSs are a further area of potential interest. There are also a number of other possible futures that lead from this investigation of MySpace. Firstly, from a methodological point of view, the current use of natural data could be combined with another established form of data collection (such as interviews) as a way of evidencing the claims in this study. This would give further analytic weight to

claims made in this thesis by comparing the responses to different questions about the use of MySpace. Livingstone (2008) identifies that this process is best achieved by combining the interviews with a period of SNS activity. This would have particular significance in the investigation of profile changes as the interview questions could be orientated to why people might make particular changes to their profiles.

Secondly, some of the ideas could be developed to have a more critical stance on the role of technology and its usage. For example, the notion of the brand me could be developed to be further critical of the way that people have to constantly re-brand themselves in MySpace in order to provide a platform for communication. This would be able to develop certain ways that the technology fuels a type of behaviour that echoes issues of consumption, labour and control. Similarly, in noticing that the profiles are dedicated to continuing certain forms of activity, it would be interesting to follow how certain issues (such as gender or class) become perpetuated as a normal activity in this sense of continuation. This would provide a more critical view on the experience of using MySpace.

Thirdly, the application of this method could be applied to other forms of SNSs. This will need to use those sites that have a similar level of public access as MySpace. Research of this kind would be beneficial to offer a basis for comparison to the use of MySpace. For example, some of the other SNSs (e.g. LinkedIn or Facebook) do not allow similar abilities of customisation. How is the self constructed in these SNSs? This question would also offer a good opportunity to continue the constructionist understanding of the self that has been identified in this thesis. This could include a level of cross-cultural research to explore if other SNSs can be investigated using this method. For example, how do other SNSs such as *Cloob* in Iran, *Mixi* in Japan or *Ultra* in Egypt allow users to mediate notions of self and identity? Questions of this kind are pivotal to the investigation of SNSs in the future and would aid further discussions with regard to local contingencies of technology, discourse and culture.

13.5 Final Thoughts

By way of final conclusion, it is interesting to look at the work of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. In 'The Library of Babel' (1941) published in Collected Fictions (1998), Borges describes the universe as one colossal library that contains an infinite collection of books that are stored in a hexagonal structure of never ending levels. Every floor of the library has four walls of bookshelves and everything that a

human being would need for survival. The books are arranged in a random order and are considered to contain every single possible ordering of just a few basic characters (mostly letters and punctuation). The narrator depicts the endless search for one overarching book that would reveal the truth about all other books. This search relentlessly drives many men to despair due to the fact that most books are utterly useless to the reader. The story echoes a theme that is prominent in Borges' earlier writings of 'The Total Library' ('la biblioteca total').

The journey of the narrator symbolises the endless search for truth, reality, or any of Borges' other signature themes that are driven by the quest for a universal answer to the question of existence. Endlessly searching for truth in a sea of information strikes a chord with the interaction in MySpace. Like Borges' library, MySpace involves an infinite stream of seemingly trivial communication that is driven towards an idealised form of interaction – towards constructing the self. Many users find themselves absorbed by the possibility that somewhere in this mass of communication is an experience that is unlike the rest. Through the playful, caring, creative and imaginative constitutions of the self users set out to find this experience. Perhaps, like the character in Borges' library, it is the journey in MySpace that keeps us going:

> I cannot think it unlikely that there is such a total book on some shelf in the universe. I pray to the unknown gods that some man – even a single man, tens of centuries ago – has perused and read that book. If the honor and wisdom and joy of such a reading are not to be my own, then let them be for others. Let heaven exist, through my own place be in hell. Let me be tortured and battered and annihilated, but let there be one instant, one creature wherein thy enormous library may find its justification. (Borges, 1998: 71-72)

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Appendix 1

Membership Number	Age	Gender	Friends	Received posts in one month	Sent posts in one month	No. profile changes	Blog present
1	18	Male	1368	28	5	3	1
2	24	Female	459	20	10	1	1
3	19	Female	147	22	1	1	0
4	30	Female	5	1	0	0	0
5	35	Male	269	18	2	2	4
6	34	Male	978	17	3	3	3
7	27	Male	76	4	0	0	0
8	24	Female	124	12	4	0	0
9	19	Male	378	51	24	6	1
10	19	Female	424	57	23	2	5
11	22	Female	266	12	10	2	0
12	31	Male	974	4	0	1	0
13	18	Male	185	40	11	7	0
14	25	Male	87	1	0	0	5
15	30	Male	274	35	15	2	0
16	24	Male	226	9	8	2	5
17	26	Male	79	4	0	1	0
18	21	Female	578	54	23	9	4
19	24	Male	70	3	2	2	1
20	19	Male	119	5	0	0	4
21	23	Male	34	56	23	8	5
22	19	Male	241	38	15	4	0
23	26	Female	147	3	0	0	2
24	39	Female	17	5	0	1	0
25	26	Male	217	4	0	0	0

26	21	Male	77	49	17	2	0
27	18	Male	187	29	12	6	0
28	22	Male	170	8	0	0	0
29	18	Female	123	10	0	3	0
30	23	Male	49	9	2	2	0
31	24	Female	87	8	5	9	2
32	32	Male	36	12	3	0	3
33	19	Female	218	25	11	1	2
34	18	Male	174	44	3	4	1
35	26	Male	121	16	2	0	0
36	36	Male	43	21	8	5	1
37	22	Female	68	46	16	10	0
38	31	Male	27	45	50	16	3
39	30	Female	163	16	0	0	0
40	23	Female	89	59	16	4	0
41	22	Female	119	28	9	2	1
42	25	Male	17	12	4	0	1
43	29	Male	63	11	2	1	0
44	37	Female	14	1	0	0	0
45	19	Male	24	9	0	0	0
46	23	Male	128	7	3	0	3
47	26	Female	43	42	11	2	0
48	39	Female	48	17	6	7	5
49	20	Female	82	1	0	0	5
50	26	Male	148	11	1	0	1
51	19	Female	95	13	3	3	2
52	22	Female	142	33	12	10	1
53	22	Female	110	13	9	6	5
54	32	Female	65	11	1	5	4
55	28	Male	13	0	0	0	0
56	20	Male	378	103	55	7	0

57	20	Female	113	4	0	3	5
58	23	Male	221	42	11	2	0
59	28	Female	122	76	49	6	3
60	18	Male	51	4	0	1	0
61	21	Male	621	42	19	9	0
62	51	Male	37	9	0	3	0
63	33	Male	373	3	0	0	5
64	34	Female	102	35	17	4	3
65	23	Male	183	7	2	2	1
66	24	Male	117	3	0	0	1
67	28	Male	2	0	0	0	0
68	29	Male	175	47	28	12	5
69	27	Male	119	6	1	0	0
70	22	Male	92	13	6	2	5
71	25	Male	1014	39	10	0	5
72	21	Female	54	8	1	2	4
73	not given	Female	109	4	0	3	5
74	38	Male	100	9	3	3	5
75	26	Male	110	55	12	15	4
76	18	Female	128	31	10	7	5
77	25	Male	55	6	1	0	5
78	18	Female	65	3	0	2	2
79	26	Male	51	1	0	0	0
80	22	Male	163	11	3	23	0
81	22	Male	73	7	1	0	0
82	22	Female	85	6	2	0	0
83	27	Female	2128	37	4	4	5
84	26	Female	74	45	15	5	0
85	20	Male	227	25	18	3	3
86	18	Male	279	14	2	5	0
87	29	Female	309	4	1	2	5

88	not given	not given	not given	not given	not given	unknown	unknown
89	27	Male	93	17	2	6	4
90	27	Male	50	16	0	0	5
91	24	Female	107	6	1	0	1
92	46	Male	416	17	6	0	1
93	51	Male	3	9	0	0	4
94	22	Female	2227	64	18	4	5
95	34	Male	76	87	29	4	2
96	20	Female	12	4	0	2	3
97	22	Male	67	11	2	3	5
98	27	Female	99	19	10	0	5
99	27	Male	12	5	0	0	6
100	26	Female	17	15	2	0	5