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Defining the 'Authentic': Identity, self-presentation and gender in Web 2.0 networked social media.

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## **Abstract**

As the Internet has become increasingly integrated into people's everyday lives, it has become increasingly important to consider the opportunities it provides for social interaction, self-presentation and self expression. Online spaces have often been considered to be quintessentially postmodern in potentials, allowing for play and experimentation detached from local geographic contexts and disconnected from visual markers of difference such as gender and ethnicity. Debates about affordances and potentials of online interaction have been reframed by several emergent trends in Internet usage encapsulated in the term 'Web 2.0 networked social media'- including social networking and media sharing sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr. These sites represent a renewed focus on the production of an 'authentic', often visually represented self online, strongly grounded in both offline and online networks of experiences, locations, relationships and contacts. These occupy a differing, interesting set of positions with respect to theories of contemporary identity and sociality, emphasising authenticity and permanence and embedding the individual in local contexts rather than emphasising anonymity and fluidity.

This PhD investigates the impact of these trends, broadly examining gender, self-presentation, identity and interaction in the context of contemporary online spaces. Examining self-presentational and interactional practices and the display of taste online, this thesis will argue that the concept of 'authenticity' is a crucial structuring factor across all aspects of contemporary online interaction. The thesis will explore and examine the implications of this discourse of authenticity which delineates the boundaries of acceptable online self-presentation and interaction, and yet lies in tension with the complexities of impression management across the complex merged audiences brought together on social networking sites. The uncertainties and ambiguities of the merged audience here provoke a reflexivity which leads to a reaffirmation of an essentially unreflexive, pre-social self as 'authentic'. Taking into account the need to account for agency and reflexivity the thesis will work towards an understanding of online self-presentation, gender and identity which incorporates the multiple narrative, performative and aesthetic aspects of identity.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is all my own work, and that this thesis has not been presented for any other degree or professional qualification.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Little more than 20 years ago, few people knew what a web page was let alone had one. Nowadays, especially amongst younger people, it is more unusual *not* to have some kind of self representation online. The near inescapable ubiquity of Facebook in particular is such that Forbes.com writer Kashmir Hill recently quipped- “nowadays, if you’re not on Facebook it’s possible you don’t exist” (2012: para 1).

As the Internet has moved into the mainstream, it has become deeply integrated within our social lives. As we socialise and present ourselves online, we create multimedia archives of our experiences, opinions, emotions and relationships over time- selective accounts of what we consume, what we make, what we do and what we feel (Beer and Burrows 2007). As Jurgensson comments, the Internet has become so integrated within everyday life that experiencing and sharing online have become, for many, intertwined:

“When overhearing a funny conversation we might think to tweet it; when hanging out with friends we might create a status update for Facebook; and when at a concert we might find ourselves distracted by needing to take and post a photo of the event as it happens. When the breakfast I made the other week looked especially delicious, I posted a photo of it before even taking a bite” (2011: para 1).

Indeed, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have become part of the daily routine for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. There are around 30 million users of Facebook in the UK alone, and in 2011 it was reported that 48% of 18-34 year olds worldwide check Facebook as soon as they wake up in the morning (Alexa traffic data 2013; Digital buzz 2011). With the increasing integration of online social media within everyday life, distinctions previously made between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ are blurring, and online and offline are increasingly seen as overlapping sites for social interaction and identity performance (Beer and Burrows 2007; Boyd 2007; Marwick 2011).

### **Identity and self-presentation in Web 2.0 ‘networked social media’**

The rise of Web 2.0 ‘networked social media’ - a subset of popular media which have been particularly instrumental in this increasing integration of online and offline- has resulted in a re-framing of debates about online interaction and its potentials (Boler 2007; Carstensen 2009; Turkle 1995). Networked social media, such as social networking sites and micro blogging sites, (Gordon 2007) differ in structure, focus and purpose from the more anonymised community and interest based social spaces studied in earlier research. Debates about the potentials of earlier media were often predicated on assumptions of anonymity or pseudonymity, relative detachment from other social contexts, and an unprecedented control over self-presentation. Many networked social media strip away these factors, eroding rather than enabling anonymity, documenting and displaying more aspects of daily life than ever before, fixing rather than detaching individuals from local contexts, and bringing back the body through photographs and the display of demographic details of gender, age and locality (Boyd 2007). These changes in popular online media have provoked new questions about identity and self-presentation online- and new cultural anxieties about the impact of online media on relationships, identity and culture (Boyd 2007).

The central aim of this research is to investigate identity and self-presentation and gender in the context of Web 2.0 networked social media. Within this, as will be elaborated below, the research has several related aims. It will look at how users present themselves online and think about the relationships between themselves, their lives and their mediated representation on these sites. In doing so, it will look at the implications of the types of interaction and self-presentation encouraged by these media, their 'egocentric' structure and their tendency to bring together audiences from different contexts. It will also account for and investigate the changes in online media that have occurred since the 1990s, and the transformative impact this has had on online media use and the discourses surrounding it. It will aim to theorise identity, self-presentation and gender in a way that takes into account the experiences and perspectives of site users, by looking at three important themes in networked social media- image, narrative, and authenticity.

Social media, it will be argued, encourage a ‘narrativisation’ of experience, and focus

upon the display of photographs and consumer tastes, while placing a strong emphasis on being 'authentic'. Narrative, image and authenticity are central themes not only because, as this thesis will show, these concepts are highly relevant to the visual, image saturated and narrativising focus of many networked social media, but also because these broad themes are key aspects of sociological theories of social change and of identity, which these media both reflect and confound in illuminating ways. Moreover, networked social media and the discourses surrounding them differ in important ways from older online media and have differing relationships with these themes, which illuminate aspects of the relationships between identity, self-presentation and the social. Issues relevant to identity and self-presentation in networked social media, splitting along these conceptual lines of narrative, image and authenticity, are a microcosm of broader engagements with these concepts in sociology. These three concepts will be explored in separate chapters and then developed throughout the thesis, aiming to arrive at a theorisation of identity, gender and self-presentation grounded in the data, which both draws upon and further develops existing theoretical concepts.

In looking at what kinds of self-presentation practices and conceptions of identity and self are encouraged by these sites, the research will place a particular focus upon gender as an important aspect of identity and its presentation that has been particularly transformed by shifts in popular types of online media. Gender and its construction, online and offline, offers a rich and interesting area of inquiry which raises important questions about the construction of identities in contemporary social contexts.

In the early stages of the research project, this thesis initially intended to focus solely upon the ways in which the affordances and potentials of gender have been reconfigured by the changes brought by networked social media, filling an under-acknowledged gap in the literature. However, as will be elaborated in the methodology chapter, this focus expanded over time into a broader focus upon theorising multiple aspects of identity relevant to Web 2.0, including narrative and image and authenticity, which emerged as of central relevance to understanding the

ways identity and self-presentation are conceived of and discussed on these sites.

Thus, gender will serve as an example of broader identity processes, but it will also be acknowledged as a particularly important aspect of individual identity, with a unique impact upon individuals' lives. As well as theorising gender and identity, this thesis has a feminist concern for investigating the processes by which gender is experienced and conceptualised, but also resisted and challenged by users of online media.

This chapter will elaborate on these aims, and upon the position of Web 2.0 networked social media within the past and present of online media. This will involve an overview of the history of research into identity online, comparing the concerns and debates of early online research with more recent research into Web 2.0 sites, showing the distinctions and differences between these media and their implications for the study of identity and self-presentation and gender. This will show that there has been a shift from considering online interaction in terms of the risks and potentials and limitations of anonymity and identity play, towards consideration of the difficulties of impression management and privacy in a context where previously private aspects of existence are narrativised and displayed. Sections will overview the interesting positioning of Web 2.0 networked social media with respect to a range of theories, particularly those relating to the recurring themes of narrative, image and authenticity, and their relationships with contemporary identity and society. The aims of the research in investigating identity, self-presentation and gender in networked social media will be further expanded upon, with reference also to the theory which will be both used and evaluated throughout this PhD. The chapter will finish with an outlining of the structure of the rest of the PhD and a summarisation of its main arguments.

### **Defining 'Web 2.0 networked social media'**

This section will describe the common features of the sites to be studied in the research within the category of 'Web 2.0 networked social media', and overview

differences in their uses, affordances and structure in comparison with older media.

While ‘Web 2.0’ was coined as a marketing buzzword (Scholz 2008), the term is useful in encapsulating a set of trends in popular online media from the mid 2000s to the present day. Web 2.0 characteristics include an increased hybridisation of site features and multimedia content, and an emphasis on collectively creating ‘sharing’ and ranking content (Beer and Burrows 2007). While the fast pace of change online has meant some have been eager to move on to ‘Web 3.0’ or even ‘Web 4.0’ (Allen 2013), ‘Web 2.0 networked social media’ still encapsulates many of the most popular media on the Internet today. Within Web 2.0, networked social media, (Gordon 2007) as the term suggests, are those Web 2.0 media organised with a networked social structure, for the purposes of interaction and content sharing with others.

The most prominent examples of Web 2.0 networked social media are social networking sites, such as Facebook, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter, but the term also covers creative media sharing sites such as Flickr, YouTube or DeviantArt. These networked social media have replaced the personal website as Internet users’ main media for self representation, social interaction, content sharing and creative production online (Gordon 2007). Social networking sites such as Facebook have become particularly ubiquitous, with as much as 50% of the UK population having a social networking profile on Facebook alone (Alexa traffic data 2013).

Reflecting growing tendencies towards a ‘personalisation’ of Internet experience and a move away from more community based online spaces, a key shared aspect of Web 2.0 networked social media is that they are ‘egocentric’ in structure. They are arranged and navigated with the individual user profile as the main interface and central ‘node’ of the network, connected to other ‘nodes’ in a network of friends and contacts (Boyd 2008).

The user profile is the ‘public face’ of the user, and the point at which most public interaction, information sharing and creative production takes place on networked social media sites. It gives a visual representation of the user, whether through a

photograph or an avatar image, shows their real name or a pseudonymous username, lists their contacts on the site, and is organised with fields detailing an individual's tastes and interests. The profile typically shows a series of recent 'statuses' which give an ongoing account of the site user's experiences, thoughts, feelings and opinions, as well as showing responses and comments from others to these statuses (Boyd 2007, 2008). Statuses give a space for users to give 'status updates' on their recent doings, but also to upload and share content in text, image and video. Both updating your own status and sharing your own links and tastes and media content on your profile, and reading and looking at and commenting on the updated statuses, links and media content of others, are important aspects of networked social media site use. Some example profiles from the sites studied in the research can be found in Figures A1-A3 in the Appendix of this thesis on pages 283-285.

All online sites exist as an “interface between offline and online” (Gajjala 2009:63), but many networked social media are integrated within everyday happenings to an unprecedented degree (Beer and Burrows 2007; Boyd 2007; Hand 2012; Markham and Baym 2009; Marwick 2011). They make the “dimensions of everyday life highly visible, exposing and articulating existing social practices” (Robards and Bennett 2011:309). They encourage a narrativisation of experience- an “ongoing codification of habitus” (Beer and Burrows 2007:3.4) - which builds up an archived account over time, rather than allowing for each interaction to fade away in the moment.

While some of the sites within networked social media allow for interaction with strangers as well as known contacts, many networked social media are orientated towards contact with pre-existing contacts. Many networked social media ‘collapse social contexts’ together and create a complex ‘merged audience’ of social ties from different contexts across offline and online bounds, creating a need to manage a ‘networked self’ (Boyd 2007; Paparcharissi 2011). While some Web 2.0 sites allow for the use of pseudonyms, many are the anti-thesis of anonymous in explicitly prohibiting the use of pseudonyms, displaying photographs and given names rather than the avatars and user names common to other online media. Throughout this thesis, as will be elaborated later in this chapter, I will be making a distinction

between what I call ‘merged audience’ and ‘pseudonymous’ sites, due to the significance of the differences between these site types in structuring identity and self-presentation.

Overall, these media, especially where they merge audiences, prioritise the production of an ‘authentic’ self embedded in local experiences and social contexts, connected across online and offline boundaries. They are also a hybrid and visual media, which ‘bring back’ the body in mediated form in the display of photographs of the self (Boyd 2007; Hand 2012). Rather than encouraging fleeting online interaction, networked social media have the potential to fix it in time and archive it in records from which over disclosure and transgression cannot be easily erased (Boyd 2007; Hand 2012; Van Dijk 2008). Consequently, in social research, a discourse which frames online interaction in terms of anonymity and ambiguity has given way to a discourse which concentrates on impression management and privacy concerns and the implications of the externalisation of previously private aspects of lived experience (Beer and Burrows 2007; Hand 2012).

Both within social theory and broader society, these media have been subject to a myriad of both techno-skeptical and more optimistic discourses which question their potentially transformative effect upon intimacy, social relationships, and privacy. Media such as social networking sites have become key focuses of anxieties about consumerist, narcissistic tendencies in culture, seen as eroding intimacy, as causing “loneliness” and distance even as they aid connectiveness (Bauman 2011; Hand 2012; Marwick and Boyd 2010; Marwick 2011, 2005; Turkle 2011). News media have vacillated between viewing online media as risky due to too much and too little anonymity, stirring up fears of anonymous online predators and the surveilling eye of bosses ready to judge your employability on your Facebook page (Dwyer et al 2007; Marwick 2011). The Internet, once considered a space for anonymised interaction, has now become implicated in a theorised erosion of the bounds of public and private to the extent that Bauman (2011) has claimed it may usher in the ‘end of anonymity’.

### **Literature review - Early Research**

Before going on to discuss the literature on Web 2.0, it is helpful to situate Web 2.0 networked social media within the history of research into identity, self-presentation and gender online. This illuminates aspects of how changes from pseudonymous, group based interaction towards networked social media have brought about a parallel shift in discourses and concerns about online interaction.

Research into online environments has been described by Carstensen (2009) as involving two main 'phases' - before and after the rise of networked social media. In the first 'phase' of online research from the 1990s to the early 2000s, most of the media studied were pseudonymous, text based, usually involved contact with strangers, and were group orientated to the extent many of them were described as 'communities'.

Following general tendencies in approaches to new media, there was a divide between more utopian and skeptical framings of the Internet's potentials and limitations (Boellstorff 2008; Carstensen 2009). Key to many ideas about the Internet's potentials were the possibilities the Internet provided for an environment where interaction was detached from the physical body and where potentially "race, gender, disabilities, physical appearance, even social status lose their significance... where all that matters is one's capacity for expression" (Wired magazine 1990: para 15). Many early studies particularly focused on gender, due to its particular primacy as a social category and its perceived connections to the physical body (Armentor-Cota 2011; Carstensen 2009). Debates surrounding the potentially transformative potentials of these sites for gender provide a good example of the ways in which issues of anonymity, the body, and identity were key themes of early research, and of the ways in which key aspects of online media and the debates surrounding them have changed.

Turkle's ethnographic study 'Life on the Screen' (1995) was an exemplar of more optimistic views of online potentials. She argued that the Internet was "a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self



that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, [Internet users]... self-fashion and self create” (1995:180). A fluid multiplicity of identities here, including gender, were assumed to be like changeable ‘masks’, easily assumed and cast off in the moment.

Turkle’s study also highlighted the potentials of being able to conceal visual and verbal cues as to gender and other socially significant identifications. Turkle described how the possibility of not being perceived as female gave her a sense of “unfamiliar freedom” she had “always imagined the birthright of men” (1995:210-211). Early ‘cyberfeminist’ work, such as the work of Haraway (1991), stressed the utopian potentials of online contexts’ disruption and reconfiguration of the links between self-presentation, gender and the body (Súnden 2003).

Many, however, were quick to point out the ways in which socially significant identifications such as gender, ethnicity and class- and social inequalities surrounding them- were carried across into online interaction (Armentor-Cota 2011; Boler 2007; Brennan 2008; Carstensen 2009; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Herring 1994, Kendall 2002; McRae 1996; Nakamura 2002). Herring’s early studies suggested that male dominated online environments were in fact a communication medium hostile to women, in prioritising what she described as a masculine ‘adversarial’ communication style (1994). Others pointed out the ways in which discrimination, misogyny and racism persisted online, such as Dibbell’s early account of a ‘rape in cyberspace’ (1993; Morahan-Martin 1998). Several researchers posited that in response to ‘reduced cues’ and ambiguities as to other users’ gender, users engaged in “ ‘hypergendering’ by enacting caricatured gender stereotypes and reproducing gender stereotypes through their interactions” to compensate and make their gender visible (Armentor-Cota 2011:28; Kendall 2002; O’Brien 1999). Kendall suggested that the freedom Turkle described herself as experiencing online was contingent on her being read as ‘implicitly male’ and suggested that Turkle’s research confused “gender malleability with limited gender *exchangeability*” (2002:222).

Boler criticised early research for framing online environments as a place where socially significant identifications can be ‘transcended’. She claimed this falls into the trap of reaffirming a ‘digital Cartesian’ mind/body split which inaccurately situates inequalities and differentiation in the physical body whilst privileging a ‘masculinist’ notion of the mind as ‘transcending’ the limits of the abject body (2007). Similarly, Nakamura criticised the practices of ‘identity tourism’- trying out another identity online out of curiosity or a desire for new experience- often involving a practice of more privileged groups reifying stereotypes about different ethnicities and genders (2002).

Online, gender, class, disability or ethnicity of course do not disappear as powerful discourses, narratives and concepts when their physical signs are obscured or presented only in mediated form (Armentor-Cota 2010; Boler 2007; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002). Indeed, research on the whole suggests that despite the potential for ambiguity online, "users rely on markers such as age, sex and location to make sense of online communication" (Boler 2007:153; Armentor-Cota 2011; Carstensen 2009).

All the potentials and limitations and problems identified here as relevant to self-presentation, identity and gender online rest upon the assumptions of anonymity and the ability to conceal bodily cues and experiment with self-presentation. Notably, many Web 2.0 networked social media, such as social networking sites, remove or reduce the destabilising, playful potentials of anonymity and ambiguity entirely where they ‘reintroduce’ the body via photographs and their attendant cues, and where they encourage the disclosure of demographic details. Whereas early media were of interest for what they allowed their users to conceal, discourses surrounding Web 2.0 networked social media centre around how much they encourage their users to *reveal* about themselves and their private lives. Their re-embedding and localising tendencies present a challenge to the assumptions about online interaction’s potentials and realities which research has been slow to fully explore and answer.

It is also relevant to note that as the types of sites used and their technical possibilities have shifted over time, the Internet population has also undergone a

transformation. Early online studies often took place in spaces dominated by white, middle class men (Morahan-Martin 1998), but the Internet using population has grown in diversity as the Internet has become more affordable and accessible and mainstream, and in the UK, Western Europe and North America, the Internet population has become close to gender balanced (ITU 2012).

### **Literature review- Web 2.0**

This section will overview how the literature has illuminated key features of Web 2.0 networked social media relevant to researching self-presentation, identity and gender. In noting that narrative, image and authenticity all have an important, often implicit role in networked social media which has yet to be fully explored in depth in the literature, this section will highlight some gaps in the literature to be addressed in this research.

The self referential focus on sharing everyday events makes narrative an important theme on many networked social media, as they can be seen as encouraging a narrativisation of self and experience (Leonardi 2009). Image is important not only because these sites prioritise the visual documentation of self and experience and are suggested to have a transformative effect on the uses of photography (Hand 2012; Murray 2008; Van Dijk 2008), but also because of these sites' focus on 'image conscious' self-branding and the display of consumer tastes (Marwick 2011; Robards and Bennett 2011). The 'bringing back' of the body in photography has been a focus of concern for feminists who feel networked social media exert pressures in multiple directions to meet gendered ideals of appearance and behaviour (Boyd 2007, 2008; Manago et al 2008; Sessions 2009; Siibak 2009).

As this section will show, although some have seen these sites as still offering space for experimentation with identity, many have identified them as having a strong focus on presenting an idealised image, and upon self-presentation via the display of tastes. Researchers have suggested that this idealisation exists in tension with a strong focus on authenticity, which reflects the increased integration of offline and

online life.

This is further complicated by the 'collapsed' merged social contexts of networked social media, and their new focus on 'living publicly' and externalising previously private aspects of existence (Bauman 2011; Beer and Burrows 2007; Hand 2012; Leonardi 2009), which are theorised to present a difficult and changed context for self-presentation, complicating impression management and privacy (Boyd 2008; Marwick and Boyd 2010; Papacharissi 2011).

Though much of the research discussed below particularly focuses on social networking sites as exemplars of Web 2.0 tendencies, the research focuses and their findings illustrate many of the changes represented by networked social media.

### **Photography and 'bringing back the body'**

As Carstensen comments, after the initial attention given to gender in online media “a surprising calm has now entered feminist discourses” when it comes to online interaction (2009:4), and many of the impacts of the changes brought about by Web 2.0 networked social media remain relatively unexamined. However, what research there has been on gender and networked social media does reflect the changes brought by networked social media's encouragement of self-disclosure and the display of the body in photographs, bringing out themes very distinct from earlier debates about the potentials of interaction detached from visual cues and the body. Several studies have suggested that social networking sites encourage a sexualised self representation through photographs in ways which particularly subject young women to sometimes contradictory pressures to present themselves in attractive ways without drawing negative judgement (Boyd 2007, 2008; Manago et al 2008; Sessions 2009; Siibak 2009).

The display of photographs of the self is one aspect of these sites' focus on documenting and displaying aspects of everyday life that has transformed self-presentation online. Van Dijk (2008) and Murray (2008) have viewed these media as

having hastened the transformation of photography into a means of communication and self-presentation (Hand 2012; Van Doorn 2010; Van Dijk 2008). These media have been seen as furthering an increased mediation of life through images, in an increasingly 'visual culture', and Hand's (2012) research has given an in-depth picture of the complicated continuities and discontinuities between traditional and current uses of photography on these sites.

### **Self-branding and 'taste performance'**

As well as encouraging their users to be 'image conscious' in terms of impression management, and to share their lives in photographs and images, these sites have been seen as encouraging their users to engage in processes of "self-branding" and the 'immaterial labour' of self definition via the display of tastes in order to mine data about preferences for marketing purposes (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2005, 2011; Scholz 2008). Marwick (2011) and Hearn's (2008) work suggested that this "encourages users to see themselves and others as commodity signs, to be collected and consumed in the social market place" (2008:205). Schwarz's (2010) study of an Israeli social networking site suggested they encourage self-presentation in a way reminiscent of the advertising catalogue.

Sharing tastes and cultural material, such as photographs, videos, music and jokes, is a major aspect of interaction and self-presentation on Web 2.0 networked social media, and this content sharing 'labour' is a key aspect of networked social media's commercial success. Perkel's study of MySpace took a less critical view of this, in emphasising the creativity involved in the 'cultural remixing' of a 'bricolage' like mix of tastes and cultural products displayed on the customisable profiles of MySpace (2008). Others, such as Van Cleemput in her study of 'authenticity and subculture style' in social networking sites, have focused on the ways in which taste can serve online as a means of collective identification with subcultural identities (2008). Theories of the 'cultural omnivore' and of 'neo-tribes' (Bennett 1999; Maffelosi 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996) have been given some attention by Robards and Bennett's (2011) study of social networking sites. Their research found

that subcultures served as reference points for young people to describe themselves with reference to, without them actually identifying with subcultural categorisations.

However, if these media exemplify aspects of 'visual culture' and the mediation of self-presentation and identity through images, they also involve the telling of textual stories about the self, and processes of narrativisation, as they encourage the 'sharing' of experiences with others. Azariah (2009) and Oulasvirta et al (2009) and Leonardi (2009) have examined the ways in which users of Facebook and micro-blogging sites construct their experiences into narratives for their online audiences.

### **The 'ideal self' in tension with the 'authentic'**

While many networked social media lack the anonymity of earlier sites, constraining their potentials for experimentation with image, these media have been described as enabling and encouraging self-branding and an 'idealised' self-presentation in keeping with norms of gender, cultural narratives and discourses (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2011). For example, Leonardi's research described the potential for the strategic "inclusion and exclusion of certain information through 'fragmented narratives' of disclosure" (2009: 59) as enabling the presentation of an "idealised self". Siibak claimed social networking sites also encourage their users to reflect upon the gap between their ideal and their 'real selves' and, importantly, the 'self' they feel their audience thinks they ought to be (2009). Young women in particular were found in her research to pursue an idea of the 'ideal self' based upon 'traditional femininity' - "performed in order to match the expectations of the society and their important others seen through the lenses of the traditional women's role" (2009:15).

There are echoes of the claims and debates discussed in earlier research in the findings of Van Doorn (2010, 2011), Pearson (2009), Manago et al (2008) and Siibak (2009) that social networking sites can provide some possibility for experimentation in a way that aids identity development. Pearson has claimed that online spaces are

“deliberately playful” and “allow individuals and networks of users to play with aspects of their presentation of self” (2009:6).

However, social networking sites have been seen to foreground the production of an ‘authentic’ self, strongly tied to offline self-presentation in ways which seem to place bounds upon the potentials of online interaction (Boyd 2007, 2008; Leonardi 2009; Marwick 2005; Sessions 2009). These sites have been seen to make it easy to present an ‘idealised image’ and engage in self-branding, but they also have been seen to encourage criticism of the self-presentations of others where they diverge from what is seen as ‘authentic’ and ‘accurate’. As Leonardi has noted, “a tension exists between the idealized self and what is known as the ‘authentic self’ ” (2009:67) and site users are keen to emphasise the importance of authenticity.

Sessions’ study showed that visual self-presentation on MySpace was subject to a pervasive and critical discourse of authenticity, and that site users particularly criticised women for attempting to make themselves ‘look better than they were’ and for following trends in photographic self representation (2009). Sessions’ research found that for site users- “their online self must approximate the off-line self to the best of their abilities if they are to avoid punishment for breaching norms” (2009:1). Marwick similarly identified ‘authenticity’, in terms of a close correspondence between the online and the offline, as a pervasive norm on social networking sites. She claimed this “diminishes user agency” in precluding the possibility of identity play and experimentation (2005:2).

### **Impression management and the ‘merged audience’**

An added difficulty for self-presentation on many Web 2.0 networked social media is how to manage self-presentation in front of a ‘merged audience’ of contacts-including friends, family and co-workers- brought together from different contexts (Boyd 2006, 2007, 2008; Marwick and Boyd 2010; Paparcharissi 2011; Pearson 2009). Paparcharissi noted “the individual must then engage in multiple mini performances that combine a variety of semiological reference so as to produce a

presentation of the self that makes sense to multiple audiences, without sacrificing coherence and continuity” (2011:307). Pearson’s study showed that the particular private/public ambiguities of the audience on these sites confuse the ‘stages’ involved in self-presentation, blurring aspects of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’, public and private (2009).

Boyd’s research (2007, 2008) elaborates on the difficulties of impression management on these sites, identifying four important characteristics of social networking sites which structure them as a mediated environment for social interaction and self-presentation- “persistency, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences” (Boyd 2008:1). Persistency, searchability and replicability refer to the aspects of social networking sites which enable an archive of past interaction to be stored permanently (persistency), to be searched at any time, (searchability) and which is ‘replicable’ in that copies may be made of it which bring it out of its original context and outwith its creator’s control. The notion of the ‘invisible’ audience refers to the ambiguity of audience and the lack of immediate ‘feedback’ for self-presentation which occurs online. Her research gives an account of the ways in which these features create privacy and impression management difficulties, but also puts forward some ideas as to how these limitations can be overcome through awareness of site features and by exerting more conscious control over privacy settings (2008). Similarly, Karakayali and Kilic stressed that these sites require ‘analytic labour’, and a process of categorising and monitoring friends and contacts, to navigate the complexities of the audience (2013).

Concerns about privacy and impression management caused by these features are central to the debate, both within and outwith sociology, about the potentials and risks of networked social media and in particular, ubiquitous 'merged audience' social networking sites such as Facebook. Privacy concerns have often centred upon the lack of control site users have over who views their profile and what companies do with the data they share, and the risks and consequences of the normalisation of the disclosure of previously private personal data (Beer and Burrows 2007). Critics of Web 2.0 networked social media have claimed that their predominance has meant



that the “new online economy is linked to issues of neo-liberal surveillance, corporate control and the exploitation of users’ immaterial labour” (Barassi and Treré 2012:1271; Albrechtslund 2008; Allen 2013; Andrejevic 2005; Boyd 2007; Marwick 2011; Scholz 2008).

As can be seen by this summation of the research into Web 2.0 networked social media and the issues which emerge as relevant to their study, they differ strongly from the more anonymised, group orientated environments studied in early research. Recurrent themes are the disclosure and documentation of everyday life through narratives and text, the visual display of tastes and the body, the ability to represent the self in ‘idealised’ ways, and an emergent stress upon authenticity, defined as consistency to offline life (Carstensen 2009). Self-presentation and impression management are seen as constrained by concerns about authenticity, privacy and the ‘persistence’ of what is shared online. However, within this, researchers have stressed the potentials of these sites for self-presentation, identity development and the maintenance of social ties, stressing the creativity of site users in getting around and making the most of the constraints of the profile, and the difficulties of the merged audience.

### **Investigating difference, narrative, image and authenticity**

The literature has shown that self-presentation and interaction on these sites involves narratives and images in multiple senses, as these sites encourage users to share their experiences in text and photographs, disclose and display their tastes. These themes have been treated individually by some of the literature described above, but have seldom been considered together. The research will make a contribution to this growing field of literature by foregrounding the themes of narrative, image and authenticity which have often been a background element in other studies, and working through how these concepts interact with self-presentation and identity and gender on networked social media.

It will also address a gap in the literature by re-examining the debates of early

research in the context of new media, taking into account changes in the potentials for self, presentation, identity and gender represented by these media. Despite the comparisons implicit in claims as to the ‘newness’ of what Web 2.0 networked social media offer, it is notable that few recent studies have set out to compare the affordances and potentials of earlier more anonymous and group based media with those of Web 2.0 networked social media. Yet looking at these differences and situating new media within the history of online interaction is potentially an illuminating way of making progress in investigating the ways in which the structure and social arrangements of online media interact with processes of identification and social interaction and self-presentation.

One important way in which the research will address these differences is by looking at differences between sites *within* Web 2.0 media. It is important to note that within the category ‘Web 2.0 networked social media’ are a range of sites, with differing purposes, limitations and affordances relevant to how self-presentation and interaction take place on these sites. Many studies have concentrated only on one particular type of site, and this research, in addressing a broader range, will help to give a fuller picture of the interaction between online contexts, their site structure, and their affordances for self-presentation and identity.

An important difference within networked social media is the distinction between what I term ‘merged audience’ and ‘pseudonymous’ sites. As will be elaborated throughout this thesis, there are strong differences between sites, such as social networking sites, which involve the display of given names and prioritise interaction with a merged audience of pre-existing contacts, and pseudonymous sites such as Flickr which allow for anonymity and do not merge audiences.

As merged audience sites constitute the most popular and prominent networked social media, it is sometimes overlooked that there are pseudonymous networked social media which have features in common with the older media studied in the ‘first phase’ of online interaction as well as with other Web 2.0 sites. Investigating the differences between pseudonymous sites and those sites with a merged audience

gives greater insight into the differences that the merged audience and its lack of anonymity have made for online interaction, as well as highlighting the breadth of Web 2.0 networked social media.

### **Theoretical grounding**

As well as describing and analysing the attitudes and experiences and self-presentational practices of networked social media site users, this thesis will interrogate and investigate aspects of online social media with respect to a range of contemporary theories about identity, self-presentation and gender.

Web 2.0 media exemplify and confound several aspects of debates about the extent to which contemporary society has been transformed from a configuration where identity was more rigidly structured via grand narratives and traditional power structures, to a detraditionalised ‘late modern’ situation where reflexivity and authenticity have a role in forming a coherent path for identity through a plethora of consumer choices. Or indeed, through to a “postmodern world of instantaneous communication, hyperkinetic consumerism, and electronically mediated imagery” where coherency and constancy and authenticity are meaningless (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:3; Chaney 2004; Giddens 1991; Lash 1994; Warde 1995).

Theories of identity as narrative, and as mediated and structured by consumerist or aestheticising tendencies are all applicable to online media which potentially exemplify narrativising, hyper-reflexive tendencies in their concentration on the narrativisation of the moment, and encourage self-presentation via visual display and consumer tastes. Thus, the research will consider the broader theorised backdrop of contemporary shifts towards aestheticisation and detraditionalisation, connecting the macro-level theorisations of the role of image and narrative and taste and authenticity and gender with how they are conceived of and experienced at a ground level.

In looking at the ways in which these sites normalise the disclosure of everyday experience, the thesis will draw upon and evaluate theories of narrative, drawing on

the theories of Somers (1994) and McNay (2000) and other narrative identity theorists, as well as on Giddens' conceptions of narrative as an important aspect of 'reflexive modernity' (1991).

As well as exemplifying narrativising tendencies, networked social media prioritise the 'image' in multiple senses- encouraging site users to be 'image conscious' and present themselves with an array of visual material, as well as to define themselves via consumer tastes. Taking as a backdrop a broader conception of society as increasingly 'image saturated' or 'hyper-real' (Baudrillard 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 2000) the research will deal with multiple aspects of the image as an aspect of social meaning and as an aspect of self-presentation.

In dealing with photography and visual self-presentation, the thesis will draw on the insights of researchers into Web 2.0 media such as Hand (2012) and Murray (2008) and Van Dijk (2009), who deal with the complex mediation and documentation of everyday society through the 'image'. Overlapping trends towards visual culture, image saturation, 'mediatisation', 'celebrification' (Couldry 2008; Marshall 2010; Turner 2006) and a consumerist concern for treating self as product, are exemplified in the concept of 'self-branding', and the research will draw on Marwick's (2011) and Hearn's (2008) ideas of self-branding as a particularly prominent means of self-presentation on networked social media. The extent to which tastes are seen on networked social media as important resources for collective identification and self definition will be investigated with reference to broader debates about the 'post-subcultural' meaning of taste, popularised by Bennett (1999) Maffelosi (1996), and Muggleton (1997, 2000).

Following the principle that it is important for theorisations of self-presentation to look at the terms and concepts used by research participants themselves, the thesis will develop a theory of self-presentation which draws upon the perspectives of interviewees. This theorisation will also draw heavily from Jenkins' (2008) adaptation of the ideas of Goffman (1967, 1969), and the language of semiotics. Following the work of Boyd (2001, 2007, 2008, 2010) and Papacharissi (2011), this

conception will also be informed by their adaptations of Goffman's conceptions of impression management, which are highly relevant for discussing the difficulties of managing self-presentation in front of the merged audiences of the social networking site.

Authenticity is a recurring feature of how online interaction is discussed and features particularly prominently in discussion of networked social media, which often prioritise the presentation of an 'authentic' self across online and offline boundaries. This focus on authenticity, and the way this emerges from the particular contexts of Web 2.0 networked social media, places them in an interesting position with regards to theories about the role of authenticity in contemporary society.

While some theorists (Boyle 2004; Fine 2003; Giddens 1991; Lawler 2008; Lewin and Williams 2009; McCarthy 2009; Vannini and Williams 2009; Fine 2003) have posited that authenticity is a particularly important concept in contemporary society, providing a means of stabilisation and reflexive engagement with identity, others have questioned that authenticity can retain meaning in a 'post-structuralist' or 'fluid' world (Chaney 2004; Baudrillard 1994; Bauman 1996, 2000, 2005; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Investigating the attitudes that networked social media provoke towards self and authenticity provides input into these debates. As the thesis will show, online environments exemplify some of the proposed changes that are seen to create the need for a 'search for authenticity' whilst confounding others.

The differing configurations of relationships between self and audience across differing kinds of Web 2.0 sites potentially give insight into how differing relationships between self and audience and differing site structures produce differing notions of the 'authentic' and of identity. In investigating authenticity as a structuring factor in online interaction and self-presentation the research will draw upon the work of Vannini and Williams (2009) and Ferrera (2009), and Holstein and Gubrium, (2000, 2009) building upon their insights about the history of conceptions of authenticity and the ways in which authenticity emerges differently from differing social contexts.

Gender will be examined in the research with respect to these current debates and theories. As well as drawing upon and evaluating Butler's (1991, 1993) ideas of gender as performance, the research will draw upon West and Zimmerman's (1987, 2009) concept of 'doing' gender, Hollander's (2013) adaptation of the idea of 'accountability' to doing gender, and Kessler and McKenna's concept of 'gender attribution' (1978, 2006). Connell's (1987, 1995) conceptualisation of multiple masculinities and femininities will be drawn upon, and some theoretical difficulties with the application of these concepts will be briefly examined.

Throughout, McNay (2000) and Harrison and Hood-Williams' (2002) differing analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary approaches to gender and agency will inform the analysis. These theorists encourage an interrogation of the often common-sensical ways in which gender is used, and stress the need for a theory of gender which avoids being overly voluntarist or overly deterministic and accounts for gender as "a durable but not immutable phenomenon" (McNay 2000:1).

The thesis will draw upon and interrogate aspects of these narrative, image mediated and performative tendencies in the theorisation of identity and how they apply to and explain and are illuminated by networked social media. In doing so, it will attempt to theorise identity in a way that draws upon these theories and overcomes some difficulties surrounding the theorisation of identity, as identified by Brubaker and Cooper. Brubaker and Cooper claim that 'identity' has become a concept too loaded with ambiguous meaning to be of use that lumps together too many differing types of identifications which "saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" (2000:1). In addressing these issues the research will draw upon the work of Jenkins and his critique of some contemporary aspects of how identity is conceptualised, using in particular his concept of identity as involving processes of identification in an external-internal dialectic between self and social context (2008).

## **Research aims**

The research aims broadly to investigate identity and self-presentation in networked social media, with a particular focus on gender. Narrative, image, taste, authenticity, and how these feature in the relationships between self, identity, and overlapping local and wider social contexts, will be important themes. The research will also investigate the structuring factors which make for differing affordances and restraints with respect to agency and self-presentation and self expression.

The research will address the following research questions:

- How do site users present themselves on networked social media, and how do they feel about the relationships between themselves, their lives and identities and their mediated online representation?
  - How do site users use images in self-presentation, and choose the photos and images they use to represent themselves?
  - What is the role of taste in self-presentation on these sites, and how do site users conceive of the links between their display of taste and their identities?
- How are concepts of narrative, image and authenticity relevant to self-presentation, identity and gender, and to site users' conceptions of themselves and others on these sites?
  - Does the self-referential, narrativising focus of networked social media sites involve a 'narrativisation' of self and experience, and how does this affect people's conceptions of themselves and their experiences?
  - To what degree does the focus on 'authenticity' in Web 2.0 media reflect theorisations of contemporary society as involving a 'search for authenticity' amidst multiplicity and uncertainty?

- What implications does the renewed focus on ‘authenticity’ and visual representation of the body have for the presentation of gender and other aspects of identity on networked social media sites?
- How do site users conceive of the role of gender in self-presentation and interaction on networked social media?
- How do conceptualisations of gender and other identifications as performance and as narrative relate to self-presentation online?
- How do the changing affordances and potentials offered by networked social media affect the potentials for self-presentation online, and how does this vary within and between Web 2.0 networked social media and other media?
  - What impact does the egocentric, embedded and localised focus of the networked social media site and the ‘merged audience’, have upon self-presentation and interaction online and how users conceive of themselves and others?
  - How does this affect these media's relationship with sociological theories of identity?

As it is important to situate contemporary networked social media within the context of broader existing online social media, this will necessarily involve some comparisons between the qualities of networked social media sites and other contemporary online media. It will also involve an examination of the differences between merged audience and pseudonymous sites within Web 2.0 networked social media. This will help to investigate the ways in which differing social contexts online may allow for differing affordances and potentials.

As gender is a particularly significant category of identity, it will be given a particular focus in the investigation of identity, self-presentation and interaction.



Gender will serve both as a subject of study in itself and as a broader exemplar of social processes of identification and the links between the self and the social.

### **PhD structure**

The thesis will be structured into 7 chapters, with an initial chapter on methodology, followed by chapters dealing with the main themes of narrative, image, authenticity and gender, and a concluding chapter summing up the implications of the research.

Chapter 2 will give an overview of the methods used to conduct the research. Chapter 3 will evaluate the applicability of the concept of narrative to social networking site statuses, and look at the kinds of everyday experiences and feelings disclosed by site users. This will involve an investigation of how users make choices as to what to disclose and not to disclose and how this mediation of experience affects their perceptions of themselves and others over time. This chapter will introduce several recurring themes of the PhD, showing that site users must maintain a careful balance between being 'authentic' and considering the reactions and responses of an audience 'merged' from different social contexts.

Chapter 4 will deal with multiple dimensions of 'image', investigating both the use of photographs and consumer tastes in self-presentation, and looking at 'self-branding' practices as a form of self-presentation that draws heavily on the advertising image and promotes the idea of self as image as product. From interviewees' use of the metaphors of 'image' to refer to self-presentation, drawing on the work of Jenkins and Goffman, it will develop a conception of self-presentation as involving dialectics of personal image. Through an examination of taste and photography it will conceptualise an aspect of self-presentation as involving a dialectic between personal image and cultural images. The chapter will argue that the image, as well as being an important aspect of self-presentation, is an important aspect of the ways in which cultural meanings are conceived of, conveyed and conceptualised.

Chapter 5 will expand upon the aspects of authenticity discussed in previous chapters, arguing that authenticity serves as an important regulatory factor in social interaction and self-presentation and is closely related to site users' conceptions of self and identity. Authenticity structures how site users conceive of the links between identifications and the body, between offline and online, and between the personal and the cultural. Importantly, differing discourses of authenticity and self emerged from differing types of site, which I term 'merged audience' and 'pseudonymous' sites. The chapter will show how and why merged audience sites involve a narrow project of 'maintaining' authenticity, whereas pseudonymous sites enable 'seeking authenticity' through reflexive processes of experimentation with image. The placing of these media along axes of flexibility and fixity, fragmentation and coherence, post-structuralist fluidity and reflexive self-seeking will be explored and developed here.

In chapter 6, themes of authenticity, identity, narrative and notions of performance and image will be brought together and worked through using the example of gender, investigating experiences and conceptions of how gender is performed, interrogated and expressed online and the qualities of masculinity and femininity. The PhD will finish in the concluding chapter 7 by examining the implications of the many themes and aspects of online interaction discussed in the thesis. Drawing together the insights of differing social theories, it will end by developing a theory of identification which overcomes some of the difficulties identified by Brubaker and McNay, accounts for multiple aspects of identity processes, and avoids an overly voluntarist or determinist account.

### **Summary of research contribution**

The thesis will illustrate how networked social media's combined focuses on narrative, image and authenticity impact on the potentials and limitations of these media as spaces for self-presentation and identity development. It will also demonstrate how differing social contexts and configurations of audience online encourage differing conceptions of self and authenticity.

In looking at narrative, it will describe the accounts of self and experience disclosed on these sites as ‘fragmented micro-narratives’, which lack the ongoing coherence of full personal narratives yet are judged by online audiences by a number of narrative standards and norms, particularly tellability, intelligibility, coherence, balance, authenticity and appropriateness.

In examining the multiple dimensions of image, the thesis will claim that cultural meaning is often mediated, diffuse and connotative, rather than capturable within more textual and coherent narratives and categories. Thinking of the meaning of taste and other ‘signs’ used in self-presentation as mediated through ‘cultural images’ accounts for the loosened and diversified meanings attached to tastes and other aspects of self-presentation. This also accounts for the ways in which gender and other identifications have become conceptualised increasingly in terms of appearances and taste differences, rather than personality traits and behaviour.

Image was a term often used in describing self-presentation by interviewees, and the concept of personal image will be adapted to give a name to elements of self-presentation, as implicitly conceptualised by site users themselves. This conception will help to account for how authenticity is a motivating factor in social action as well as a means of judging the self-presentational practices of others. The use of ‘image’ by site users often positions ‘image’ as implicitly something ‘glossy’ and superficial as opposed to the ‘authentic’ substance of the real, and the thesis will show that self-branding practices are subject to a backlash which stresses the importance of authenticity against the superficiality of ‘image’.

These linkages between personal and cultural narratives and images will be shown to interact with a critical and individualistic concept of authenticity. Authenticity has been often addressed only in a simplistic manner in research into online media, yet this thesis will argue that understanding the importance of authenticity and how it structures online interaction is key to understanding and investigating online interaction and its positioning within everyday life. The thesis will demonstrate the

centrality of a complex, overarching narrative norm and discourse of authenticity as a structuring and regulating and validating feature in online interaction. Differences in discourses of authenticity between types of sites map onto differing discourses of identity and different conceptions of the relationships between the self and the social.

The thesis will show that there is a strong distinction between the potentials for self-presentation, identity and gender between merged audience sites and pseudonymous sites. The distinction between merged audience and pseudonymous sites maps onto the distinctions made between older media and networked social media- as older media were mostly pseudonymous and many networked social media have merged audiences. However, it is often overlooked that there are pseudonymous media within Web 2.0 networked social media, which have more in common with pseudonymous media outwith Web 2.0 than they do with merged audience networked social media. This suggests that with regards to self-presentation and identity and the potentials and affordances of online media, what is perceived as a distinction between Web 2.0 networked social media and merged audience media can more accurately be described as a distinction between merged audience and pseudonymous sites.

Sites with a 'merged audience', which embed the user within pre-existing social networks, have differing affordances and differing uses, and encourage a more limited and narrow sense of what constitutes 'authenticity'. The thesis will argue that the complexity of the merged audience, rather than leading to reflexivity on the self as multi-faceted, leads to a disavowal of reflexivity, and encourages a naturalised discourse of identity as coherent, natural and pre-social. Authenticity on these sites must be balanced with a requirement to consider the reactions of an ambiguous and complex audience. In response to the difficulties of impression management and the requirement to balance this with authenticity, users of these sites develop a 'critical ethics of disclosure' as to what is appropriate or inappropriate to disclose about the self.

The thesis will show that 'pseudonymous' networked social media without a merged

audience, and sites outside of Web 2.0, offer more scope for self-development via a process similar to Giddens' (1991) conception of the 'reflexive project of the self', through experimentation with image. This is due to their differing relationships with the audience and with offline life, the greater control they give over self-presentation, and the possibilities they provide for 'compartmentalising' audiences. Any experimentation and self-development is still limited and validated by the structuring concept of authenticity, but self and identity is viewed as more multi-faceted, dynamic and changeable.

The thesis will argue that individualistic conceptions of the authentic self must be taken into account in theorising subjectivity and identity. The affirmation of the pre-social self as authentic will be argued to be at once a naturalising, essentialising discourse and one which downplays reflexivity, but also one which provides a potential grounds for resistance to norms.

Recognition of the importance of authenticity to understanding online interaction in general, and the distinctions between merged audience and pseudonymous sites in particular, provides input into debates about the potentials of online interaction for reflexive experimentation with gender. Viewing gender and its representation on these sites as regulated by differing discourses of authenticity helps to identify how site features and configurations influence the potentials for gender. It helps provide a more nuanced view of the genuine potentials provided by online interaction, beyond a view of these sites as offering limitless postmodern potentials for identity play, or as mere stereotype affirming continuations of offline inequalities.

The image mediated aspects of culture, and the importance of authenticity, will be shown as reflected in site users' conceptions of gender. As we shall see, site users conceptualised gender as signified online mostly in stylised, superficial, image-like terms. Gender was seen as a chain of signifieds, with stylistic level difference connoting and connecting with more substantive narratives and discourses of dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which in turn were connected to a notion of physical difference. But this chain of signifieds was not seen as

absolutely fixed, and there were acknowledged potentials for individuals to act in ways not in keeping with gendered norms. Authenticity, and a critical approach generated by feelings of inauthenticity, will be seen to serve as a means of both naturalising and potentially encouraging resistance to cultural narratives, ideologies and norms of gender

Identifications such as gender will be theorised as performative- in the sense that they are something which is constituted in online interaction by individuals' visual and textual performance; as interactional - in the sense that it is something which is developed in interaction between individuals as Internet users impose meaning on the presentations and interactions of others; and subjective- as an aspect of identity which informs users sense of self and their practices of self-presentation. This involves a combination of narrative, performative and subjective aspects in an interplay with local and broader social contexts.

The thesis will argue that the concepts of narrative, image and performativity in themselves are difficult to use singly to capture the breadth of issues involved with self-presentation and identity, online and off. These theorisations represent trends in society which Web 2.0 networked social media illuminate and illustrate, and give insights into aspects of broader society which structure the possibilities of identity and its presentation. However, it is only when these insights and concepts are combined that a full account of the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves and their identities and that of others can be given. This serves a useful means of introducing some specificity to the language used to describe identification processes, and of bridging a gap between macro-level theory and its practical application in sociological research.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

As the research aimed to investigate practices of self-presentation and interaction, as well as the subjective experiences and attitudes of Internet users themselves, a multi-methods approach was used for this PhD. The research combined 4 initial offline and online focus groups with online observation and coding of 200 networked social media profiles, and 42 semi-structured interviews conducted via instant messenger. Focus groups were conducted first to narrow down the thematic focus of the research, and to develop and refine questions for future interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to get access to site users' feelings and experiences, relevant to the research questions, while observational methods supplemented this in providing data on self-presentational practices. This chapter will elaborate on the methodology used in conducting each of these aspects of the research and the reasoning behind their choice as it relates to the research questions. It will describe the approach to sampling with respect to both the sites chosen for observation and the recruitment methods used for gaining focus group participants and interviewees. Some of the successes, strengths and weaknesses of the methodology and of the sample will be explored, and the chapter will end with a brief overview of the ethical issues involved in conducting the research.

### **A Mixed methods approach**

As with all research, a central concern in trying to carry out a research project is identifying the methodology best suited to examining the research questions and reaching a “good fit amongst question, phenomenon and method” (Markham and Baym 2009:10).

In the case of online methodology, this is complicated by the speed in which popular forms of interaction online have evolved, making it more difficult to determine which method is appropriate for a given population and a given study (Hine 2005; Murthy 2008). The interconnections between online and offline spaces and the

convergence of online and offline social practices complicate matters further in that researchers must decide what blend of online and offline methods suit their research questions (Markham and Baym 2009; Orgad 2005, 2009).

Despite the “absence of canonical texts” in comparison to some other fields of research (Markham and Baym 2009:12) a growing body of methodological precedent has nonetheless been established for the study of online contexts. Online researchers have effectively adapted research methods to suit the particulars of online contexts, and have been both adaptive and reflective about the ways in which online contexts confound traditional notions of public/private divides and provide particular ethical difficulties (Hine 2005; Williams 2007). Methodological choices made in this thesis necessarily were informed not only by the research questions, but by the approaches taken by researchers looking at similar topics online.

Early studies of gender, identity and self-presentation online often took an ethnographic approach, involving immersion over time in a particular online community. Indeed, what has variously been termed digital, ‘online’ (Súnden 2003) or ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2005; Murthy 2008) is still a popular means of investigating more community based online media. A combination of participatory observation and one-on-one private conversation is typically used in online ethnographies, and many studies have also supplemented ethnographic data from online contexts with offline interviews and observational material. Such ethnographies, such as those of Kendall (2002) and Turkle (1995), often have had a focus both upon how shared group ways of interacting and presenting the self are developed and negotiated within online groups, and upon the experiences and opinions of individual group users and the placing of online media within their lives (ibid).

As Web 2.0 networked social media have grown more prominent, new challenges have arisen in applying ethnographic methods, due to the concentration these media have upon interactions within pre-existing, semi-private social networks. Because these sites involve a greater integration of online and offline practice, conceiving of



these sites as separate, bounded spaces which can be ‘entered’ and studied as bounded communities has become a less practical approach (Marwick 2011). There has been a move away from considering ethnography as bound by notions of ‘place’ online (Hine 2009; Marwick 2011).

There have been some prominent ethnographic studies into networked social media- for example, the work of Boyd (2007, 2008, 2010) and Marwick (2011) has involved in-depth ethnographic observation and interviews conducted both online and offline. However, participatory ethnography becomes more difficult and more potentially disruptive in online contexts where contact with strangers is not frequently a part of interaction. Pearson comments that many Web 2.0 sites are more like a ‘glass bedroom’ than an open community, as “private conversations and intimate exchanges occur, each with varying awareness of distant friends and strangers moving past transparent walls that separate groups from more deliberate and constructed ‘outside’ displays” (2009:2). The semi-private, networked structure of many contemporary social media make it less practical to attempt to participate as ‘one of the group’, when this group consists of a set of interconnected individuals and their social networks, rather having any central space for shared interaction.

Thus, in the study of networked social media, participatory ethnography is less commonly used than in earlier research. Several studies investigating themes of self-presentation and gender have adopted a blend of qualitative interviews or focus groups and some form of discourse or content analysis or survey methods. For example, Manago et al used focus groups in their study of gender and self-presentation, analysing responses using discourse analysis (2008). Separate studies of photography and self-presentation conducted by Siibak (2009) and Paparcharissi and Mendelson (2011) used a mixture of content analysis of photography and self-presentation and survey methods. The studies of Hand (2012) and Robards and Bennett (2011) and Van Cleemput (2008) of taste, photography and self-presentation, combined in-depth interviews conducted offline with content analysis of material shared online.

This type of blend of methods was also necessary for this research, as the research questions demanded examination of users' perspectives on how they present themselves and their lives in narratives and images online, as well as how they perceive and evaluate the self-presentations of others. Questions regarding gender required investigation of how site users conceive of and experience the presentation of gender online. Therefore, asking questions about experiences and opinions had to be an essential part of the research design. However, it was important too, given the research questions, to get a broader view of not only how site users thought about site use, but how they actually in practice presented themselves.

Thus, following many other studies of online identity and self-presentation, qualitative focus group and interview methods which directly asked research respondents about their experiences and opinions in detail, were combined with observational methods, which could provide a means of examining the broader context of what site users were sharing, showing and producing on these sites.

Because the initial focus of the research, in dealing with self-presentation, gender and identity in networked social media, was quite broad, the initial set of focus groups were conducted to gain an insight into what might be recurring and relevant themes in investigating these issues, as well as into effective ways of questioning site users about them. The ability of focus groups to get the differing opinions of several participants in a shorter time frame was useful, and these groups helped to lay the groundwork for later research.

As it is essential to be familiar with the structural aspects and affordances of sites under study, there was also a period of immersive observation and familiarisation with the features of the sites studied in the research. Initial observation and focus groups informed the later stages of the research, which used both semi-structured interviews and online observational methods which draw also from qualitative content analysis.

Combining focus groups, semi-structured interviews and non-participant online

observation provides some of the richness of data which can be gathered using ethnographic methods, without being visibly intrusive into spaces where interaction with strangers is not the norm. This was intended give a good combination of breadth and contextualising information from observational data, and depth from interview data. Each method used in the research and its fit within the overall data collection and analysis processes, will be elaborated below.

### **Focus groups**

The initial themes of the research, in dealing with gender, self-presentation and identity, were quite wide ranging. It was thus necessary to refine and focus the research towards particular relevant themes within these broader topics, especially given the necessity of accounting for the complexity of the differences between the media under study. The set of initial focus groups were conducted for the purpose of developing the initial research ideas and refining and developing useful interview questions.

Focus groups were chosen because they can elicit a broader range of opinions and information from differing people in a relatively short time frame. The group dynamic is useful in providing access to a breadth of perspectives given that once a subject is raised, debate from within the group can elicit debate which shows more than one way of looking at the same issue (Kitzinger 2004). From looking at and analysing recurrent themes between focus groups, useful future avenues for organising and structuring the focuses of the research emerged.

It was decided that convenience sampling would be an adequate means of obtaining the focus groups. Thus, two small focus groups were recruited via postgraduate and undergraduate mailing lists. As some greater diversity of age and education level was nonetheless still preferred for a greater breadth of demographics, these were supplemented with a group recruited using a popular local classifieds site, and a group conducted in Second Life. The Second Life group was also convenience sampling, as I was already familiar with its suitability for virtual group discussion

and was aware that there were groups and event listings that could be used to advertise the event. The aim of this online group was both to supplement the numbers of previous focus groups and to give a greater diversity of viewpoints. For all focus groups, there was no financial incentive given for participation. While all the questions asked were about Web 2.0 networked social media, the differences between the offline focus groups and those conducted in Second Life turned out to be relevant in identifying early aspects of the differences between media.

The response rates for the offline focus groups were not high, with only three participants attending each discussion. This was not ideal for the purposes of giving a wide breadth of opinion, but did have the advantage of giving more in-depth information from each participant. The groups also mostly avoided being overly dominated by any particular speaker, operating like semi-structured group interviews in which all participants had a chance to give their views and experiences. Participants were digitally recorded and transcripts were made, with focus group discussions lasting around one and a half hours.

The Second Life focus group was recruited via the placing of an events listing on the Second Life website, a blog posting, and an advertisement within a group with an interest in exploring issues of gender and identity. There were a total of 8 discussion participants in the Second Life group, some of whom dropped out during the course of the focus group. This gradual dwindling of numbers was a natural consequence of holding a long discussion event without a set end time. As the discussion lasted much longer than previous groups- with a total time of around four hours, this still meant there was a substantial amount of material contributed by the majority of participants.

Transcripts of the focus groups were coded in NVivo, and reports were written on each of the focus groups, summarising the findings and comparing the results between groups, using these as a guide to the further development of more refined research questions and the development of the interview schedule. The focus groups were invaluable in identifying what would be the recurring themes of the research

and highlighting interesting avenues for future questioning. In particular, the theme of authenticity emerged from these focus groups as a major structuring factor in online interaction and a major aspect of conceptions of the relationships between self and audience. The differences between this Second Life group and the offline groups- in terms of their attitudes to online interaction, authenticity, identity and its potentials on Web 2.0 and other sites- were striking, and this helped consolidate the importance of taking into account the differences between media and their populations. Focus groups provided an ideal medium through which to refine and improve questions to be asked in later interviews, in showing how diverse groups of people reacted to these questions.

Focus groups were instrumental in helping to establish the recurrent themes to be explored in the thesis, and conducting them encouraged a shift in the focus in the research. Initially, the intent had been to focus first and foremost on gender, revisiting earlier feminist debates about gender and its potentials in online contexts in the changed context of Web 2.0. However, from the early focus groups onwards, with input from literature on Web 2.0, the centrality of authenticity, image and narrative became apparent and established as overarching issues that would demand significant attention. Given this, gender became an example of an aspect of identity particularly transformed by Web 2.0, and an important category in itself, but also an example through which issues of authenticity and other aspects of identity and its links with the social and cultural could be explored.

### **Online interviews**

As many of the research questions directly concern what site users feel, think and experience, and the research aimed to draw upon and explore their opinions and attitudes in detail, conducting interviews with site users was an essential part of the research process.

The semi-structured interview method was chosen as offering enough structure to allow for the discussion to be guided towards particular topics of interest and for the

easy comparison of data between the topics covered by differing interviewees, as well as offering leeway for participants to divert the discussion down interesting tangents and to elaborate on their opinions and experiences.

These interviews were conducted online via instant messenger. Online interviews by instant messenger have a number of advantages as a means of data collection. The method is highly 'context natural', with interviews about Internet use taking place within the medium of computer mediated communication itself (Kazmer and Xie 2008). Interviews can also be conducted with any English speaking site user, regardless of location, are less intrusive, are self transcribing, and require less investment in terms of time and trouble and cost for both interviewee and interviewer (ibid). Because interviewees have more time to reflect on their response, they often produce more grammatically 'finished' responses, and interviewees can refer easily to the questions previously answered. They also provide less of an 'interviewer effect' in that seeing and hearing the interviewer and interviewee leads to less assumptions being made based on familiar cues of dress or manner, class or ethnicity (ibid). However, with online interviews conducted via text, this comes at the expense of a loss of visual and vocal cues.

While all studies which have evaluated using the method have found online interviews useful, some researchers have reported somewhat mixed results (Davis et al 2004; Kazmer and Xie 2008). However, many other researchers (Ayling and Mewse 2009; De Koster and Houtman 2008; Kendall 2002; Orgad 2005, 2009) have found online interviews to be just as capable as offline methods, or more so, at providing in-depth access to private aspects of experience and identity.

Orgad has pointed out that treating offline methods as a necessity for investigating online interaction can reaffirm online-offline boundaries in treating online methods as less 'real' or as impoverished in comparison to offline methods (2005, 2009). However, while she supports a view that online methods provide data with as much depth and detail as offline methods, she also found in her research that blending offline and online methods provided a better means of examining "how each

configures the other” (2005:56).

The use of online interviews in the research was motivated by a consideration of the benefits and drawbacks of online and offline methods with respect to the research questions. None of the research questions specifically required examination of the integration of these within offline life in way that is not addressable via online interview questions, especially when supplemented by offline focus groups. Thus, the advantages of online interviews were considered to outweigh their disadvantages.

### **The interview schedule**

It is important with any study to consider the most effective ways to elucidate in-depth responses on the subjects of interest to the research questions. Each broad research question was subdivided into a set of simpler, more practical questions, and interview questions were developed for each of these aspects. Development of the interview schedule was ongoing throughout the course of the research. The first iteration of the questions used in the research was tried out in early focus groups, which helped to identify which questions were most useful in drawing out helpful and detailed responses, as well to identify interesting areas which were not properly covered by existing questions. The schedule questions were refined over time in particular to draw out opinions and experiences related to the emergent important themes of ‘authenticity’, taste and impression management. Mostly this involved the addition of extra questions or more follow ups on certain subjects, rather than a modification or omission of existent questions, so that later interviews still provided data that was comparable with earlier interviews.

Questions dealt with general aspects of site use- why interviewees used the sites they used, what they felt they got out of it, what they disliked about the sites they used, how often they used them and what for, as well as about more personal aspects of self-presentation and interaction. Developing from this base, which helped contextualise interviewees' questions to further questions, the questions dealt with what users felt about their self-presentation and that of others. As the research

questions deal with narrative, image and taste as well as authenticity, interviewees were questioned about their attitudes to sharing and ‘narrativising’ experiences and emotions on networked social media, about how they used images, photographs and tastes in self-presentation, and about how they conceptualised authenticity. Questions also dealt with their opinions and experiences of how gender and other aspects of identity affected interaction and self-presentation. As the research questions required investigation of how gender structures multiple aspects of interaction and self-presentation, questions on gender asked interviewees about subjective experiences of gender, as well as about how they judged the gendered presentations of others.

A difficulty in developing the research questions was how to ask questions about gender without merely drawing out a stereotyped discourse of difference which obscures the more subtle aspects of gender. Early focus groups provided a useful means of testing interview questions in this regard. A question which showed some early success in drawing out some notions of similarities in gendered presentation and ways of acting and interacting as well as differences, was a question as to what would make the gender of an Internet user obvious. This question, as well as a follow up question about whether or not they thought their gender was obvious from their own profile or avatar, ended up providing information on interviewees' conceptions of gender, masculinities and femininities.

Interviewees were asked directly about whether or not they thought authenticity was important in order to elaborate further their conceptions of what authenticity ‘was’. While this may appear to run the risk of artificially fixing authenticity as an important topic in discussion, its inclusion in the interview schedule was directly a reflection of how important and cross-cutting it was as an implicit aspect of how interviewees viewed the self-presentation and interaction of others. It was just as present when not explicitly asked about in early focus groups as it was later when it was directly asked about. Explicitly asking about this provided useful data about how interviewees conceived of online interaction and its links with offline life, as well as further illuminating how they defined authenticity. As well as an important theme in itself, authenticity served as a means of aiding the investigation of broader aspects of



identity and conceptions of the links between self, identity and local and broader social contexts.

### **Reflection on the method**

The 42 interviews succeeded in getting rich, in-depth information about users' experiences, feelings and opinions. While online conversations are slower (De Koster and Hautman 2008) than those conducted face-to-face, interviews were typically lengthy, lasting from around 1 and a half hours to as much as 5 hours. Rapport tended to be good and interviewees tended to be articulate and reflective. Interviewees were enthusiastic about the research topic and often commented that they found the interview experience interesting.

The 'networked snowballing' form of recruitment, as well as the use of instant messenger, which reduces visible differences between interviewer and interviewee, seemed to encourage interviewees to trust me and treat me as in some sense 'on their level' as opposed to coming from a position of authority. A lack of a visible interview schedule or a recording device- aspects which distance face-to-face interviews from regular conversation- also likely make interviews seem more like a regular instant messenger conversation.

Since the research overall aims to study authenticity, it is interesting to note the ways in which questions about the authenticity of online interaction are often threaded through methodological concerns about online research methods. Both the potential for deception online by interviewees, and the potential openness with which online media allow for the discussion of personal issues in a pseudonymous context, are aspects of online interaction that have long been debated as relevant to both online research and online interaction generally (Gatson 2011). Concerns about the authenticity of online methods often overstate the potentials for deceptive practice in online interviews while understating the presence of these possibilities in face-to-face interaction. In qualitative interviews, there is no reason to suppose interviewees are significantly more likely to misrepresent themselves online than in face-to-face

contexts, even if online there is an absence of physical cues to contradict and give extra context for their claims.

In terms of the authenticity of results, the research supports the findings of researchers such as De Koster and Houtman (2008) and Ayling and Mewse (2009) that online interviews “allow participants to be more open in their responses particularly when discussing sensitive topics, allowing their 'true self' to talk” (2009:567). The reasons semi-anonymous media like instant messenger encourage greater self-disclosure as a research method overlap with some of the research findings discussed in later chapters, which show that individuals tend to feel more able to 'authentically' express themselves and their identities in pseudonymous contexts, compartmentalised from other contexts and other parts of their lives. While the topic of the interviews was not an inherently sensitive one, interviewees did contribute some rather personal and at times sensitive information about themselves and their identities.

Some, such as Luders (2004) have found online interviews easier to schedule and coordinate than offline methods, while others, such as Markham (1998) or Meho (2006) have experienced “problems of gaining technological access to the virtual environments, and of establishing dates, times and places for synchronous interviews” (Kazmer and Xie 2009:947). Time zones and technological difficulties did impede the arrangement of online interviews, and many interviewees did not turn up at the allotted times. However, online interviews are easier to fit into a schedule, and those who did not turn up on the day could more easily commit to fitting the interview in on another day.

The comfort and attitude of the researcher towards the media can be said to be an influence on the interview and the evaluations they make of the method. More experienced Internet users are more used to compensating for the lack of tone, body language and facial expression. Research experiences support Ayling and Mewse's suggestion that many of the perceived problems with online interviews “can be ameliorated by the researcher's experience of online communication, ability to type

quickly, and knowledge or experience of the topic they are researching” (2009:273). As an experienced Internet user familiar with all the media under study, as a researcher I found little difficulty conducting discussion using this method.

### **Interview data analysis**

There are a number of analytical perspectives which could feasibly have been used for the analysis of interview data, given the research questions. Since the research does deal with how site users themselves conceptualise and frame concepts relevant to the research questions, and how they use discourses and narratives, several strains of discourse analysis and content analysis were a possibility. However, thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and breadth as a means of investigating and exploring the multiple themes relevant to the research. The approach taken to the research questions was less concerned with the micro-level analysis of interaction and conversation, and more broadly concerned with looking at multiple recurring themes and approaches and ideas within perspectives and experiences.

The analysis process followed the approach detailed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in incrementally developing from lower level codes into broader categories as recurring themes and linkages became apparent in the data. It was by this process that the central themes of the research- focusing on narrative and image and authenticity and upon multiple aspects of identity- became established and developed. The coding process was aided by the use of NVivo.

Concepts such as authenticity, masculinity and femininity, and self-presentation, including aspects of image and narrative, were investigated and defined and developed not only by looking at the experiences of participants, but also by looking at how interviewees themselves used and engaged with these concepts. While sociological research necessarily involves the development of concepts and the analysis of data in ways that may differ from the ways in which individuals themselves conceive of them, it was thought important to develop theories and concepts which are of analytical use in describing and analysing the actual ways in which concepts and terms are invoked, conceptualised and negotiated in interaction.

Grounding theory in the perceptions and conceptions of individuals does involve, to some extent, taking their uses and assumptions at 'face value'. However, examining the implicit underlying aspects of their conceptions can provide a means of not just describing the surface ways in which concepts are used and negotiated but also the understandings and broader conceptions which underpin their use.

### **Online observation**

To investigate self-presentation and identity on networked social media, it is necessary to examine how users actually present themselves and interact with others on their site profiles. Investigation of the specifics of the kinds of experiences, tastes, images and content shared on the profiles of these media are directly relevant to research questions which aim to investigate the ways in which these sites encourage self definition via taste, image and the narrativisation of everyday experience.

To give a full picture of what site users do on the sites under study and supplement and contextualise the interview data, observational methods were used which combined elements of observational approaches and content analysis. My research does not claim to be an 'ethnography', because it lacks a full participatory element. This is because interaction with strangers is not an ordinary part of site use with all of the sites under study, and participatory interaction might be perceived as intrusive and disruptive. The research questions' focus on a broad range of media also would make it difficult for an ethnographic study of one particular site to provide the breadth required to answer the questions. The research did, however, involve the adaptation of the ethnographic method of 'observation', and the combination of this method with interviews was intended to provide the combination of breadth and in-depth detail given by ethnographic research.

The process of looking at, coding and analysing networked social media sites is an example of a process that does not have a perfect direct analogue in earlier research methodology. Online environments occupy a complex ontological position in being both in a sense a set of dynamically updated documents consisting of linked sets of text and images and multimedia content, and a 'space' which can be entered and

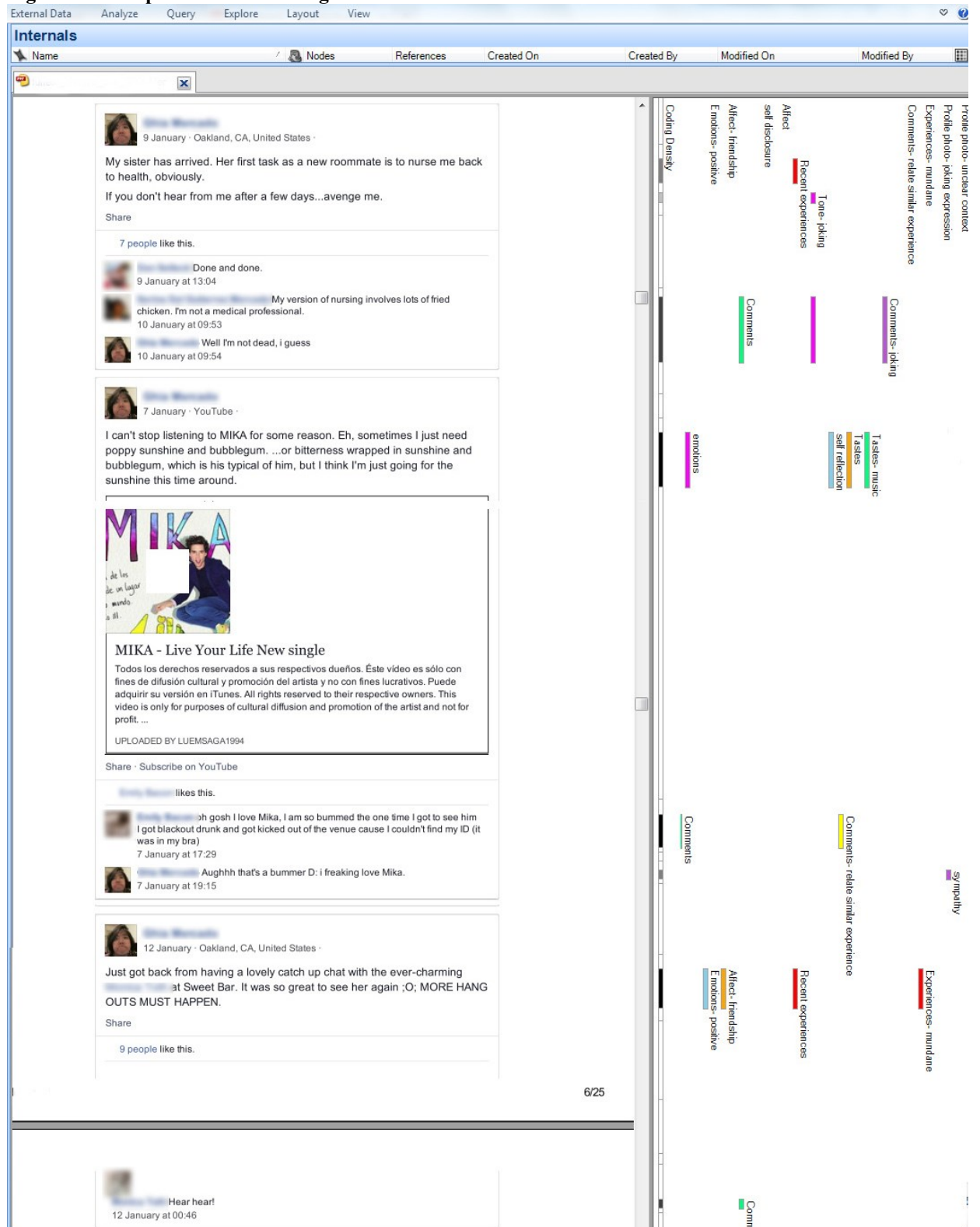
navigated and in which interaction can be 'observed' (Hine 2005). Complicating the matter, on many sites, interaction leaves its textual and visual traces behind long after the interaction is over, leaving a history of visible interaction over months or even years (ibid). Unlike with most traditional observational methods, interaction can be observed unobtrusively and easily online (Murthy 2008).

The term 'observation', while imperfect for describing a process that involves analysis of textual and visual data, is used in my research as a shorthand to reflect the fact that the research involves the 'observation' of both interaction and self-presentation online, and not the mere analysis of static documents. The method straddles the line between qualitative content analysis and ethnographic observation.

The observational method used involved an initial 'immersive' period of making use of these sites to get a feel for their structural bounds and affordances and social norms, as well as reading other people's profiles and interaction. 200 profiles were then sampled for analysis via random sampling from a selection of publicly available profiles. 4 pages from each profile were collected in PDF format- encapsulating the most recent pages of updates and interactions and also the profile fields provided for self description, in order to give a representative selection of interaction and self-presentation for each profile. They were then coded in NVivo, section by section, including both textual and visual content, according to the purpose and type of the content being shared, disclosed or discussed, starting with lower level coding and progressing to the development of broader categories. This aspect of the process drew heavily on qualitative content analysis methods. In looking in particular at visual content, the research was able to draw upon the precedent set by studies by Siibak (2009) and Paparcharissi and Mendelson (2011), who developed useful sets of codes for the analysis of photography. Figure 1, overleaf, gives an example of how the profiles for observation, converted into PDF format, were coded in sections in NVivo. Codes were developed for different types of profile photographs and differing types of disclosure, taking note, for example, of the emotional states referred to, whether content referred to a current experience or a more general opinion or view, the depth of disclosure, the tone used, the types of responses given

by others, and many other factors.

**Figure 1: Example of Profile Coding**



Supplementing the coding process, for each profile, research notes were made summarising the interaction and self-presentation observed, summarising aspects such as how much interaction was going on and about what general subjects, how much disclosure was involved, how much they mentioned their tastes and interests, how much self description was involved, and what kind of photographs and images and links they were sharing. The process of summarising profile content was very useful, supplemented with coding, at helping to bring out similarities and differences and recurring themes between profiles. Care had to be taken summarising profiles, however, not to let the summary obscure the actual content itself, as any summary is necessarily reductive.

### **Reflections on the method**

Observation was an illuminating process with respect to the research questions, giving insight into the variety of ways of interacting and presenting the self on networked social media sites. Initially it was intended that the observational process would follow the connections on each individual's profile to investigate the nodes of their social network and follow interaction between profiles. However, as the research was restricted to sampling publicly available profiles, this was impractical for sites where most users kept their profiles private. Nonetheless, while access to friends' profiles would have aided with the interpretation of interaction, it was still possible to gain useful data from observing the public interactions between users and their friends on their profiles.

The range and depth of data gleaned by reading networked social media site profiles varied according to the norms and structure of each individual site under study, as well as between individual users. A significant amount of what is shared on social networking sites occurs in private, and what is shown in public, in being aimed at a pre-existing network of friends and contacts, often would demand being an 'insider' to that social network to fully understand (Boyd 2008). Observation was necessarily limited to what is externally visible, but this still provided useful data.

Some users made extensive use of the interactional features of the site, socialising both seriously and playfully with others, others interacted very little with other users, or interacted with them only in relatively casual ways. While profile statuses and posts often referenced personal experiences, there was wide variance in the type of disclosures made. The information conducted via online observation provided a useful means of contextualising the findings in giving data on a wider range of profile types and ways of acting and interacting.

### **Sampling – choosing the research site**

Faced with a very broad range of popular media to choose from, a question that had to be addressed early on in the research was which sites to study, and secondarily, what individuals to recruit from these sites and how. Making a selection as to which Web 2.0 sites to study was partly guided by the sheer popularity of the sites studied and the populations of their users, as well as by a desire to cover a broad and representative range of Web 2.0 media.

From evaluation of the main features of differing types of networked social media, 3 broad types of site were identified as representative of the popular forms of networked social media- social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, and media sharing sites. This provides a cross-cutting selection of the most popular and prominent sorts of networked social media. The most statistically popular site in each category was chosen for sampling, but there was also an attempt made to cover the variety of types of site within these. For example, as the most popular social networking site, Facebook was extensively sampled from, but this was supplemented by sampling from MySpace, which, while declining in popularity, was useful in providing an example of a visually customisable social networking site as opposed to the more template bound Facebook profile. There was also a smaller observational sample from the microblogging site Twitter and from creative media sharing websites such as Flickr and DeviantArt. DeviantArt was chosen as the largest platform for creative art and fiction sharing, and Flickr as the most popular host for



photography, to capture the variety of sites within this category.

In total, 200 profiles were observed and coded, with 100 of these from Facebook and 50 from MySpace, and 50 from DeviantArt and Flickr and Twitter. This disproportionate focus on social networking sites reflects the greater prevalence of social networking sites within networked social media.

All research participants were recruited due to their participation in one of the above sites. However, interviewees had typically used a range of differing online media, both within and outwith Web 2.0, including several users of the virtual world Second Life. Their opinions of the differences between the affordances and constraints of the differing media helped illuminate the ways in which sites produce and encourage certain self-presentational and interactional processes and differing discourses about online sociality, authenticity and the self. A broad range of types of sites and their affordances, within and outwith Web 2.0 networked social media, were thus investigated in the research, although Facebook, as the most popular media, was the only site to be used by nearly all interviewees.

### **Interviewee Recruitment methods**

While the massive potential sampling pool involved with a study of a subject like identity and gender is convenient, the sheer size of the pool causes a number of potential difficulties in determining how to recruit interviewees from such a large potential sample. The research questions, in broadly dealing with gender, identity and self-presentation and online media, did not require focus on any particular demographic group, and so it was decided that a sample diverse in factors, such as age and class, would be useful to cover a representative range of different perspectives and viewpoints. In order to provide balanced data on how gender interacts with self-presentational practices and affects experiences, a relatively balanced sample with respect to gender was aimed for. Interviewees were not given a financial incentive for participation, as due to the broad sampling pool, it was felt that enough interviewees could be recruited without recourse to this. Because of the

greater ethical complications involved in interviewing under 18 year olds, the research focused only on adults- that is, only those over 18. As many other studies have focused particularly on young people, the broader range of ages sampled adds some breadth to the literature and potentially gives insight into how age affects site use.

Anyone over 18 and English speaking was considered to be a potential participant in this study. While the breadth of nationality involved in sampling from anywhere in the English speaking world might seem to complicate analysis in introducing cultural differences, the breadth provided was seen as worth this potential difficulty.

The difficulties of access and the ethics and etiquette of approaching strangers online on many Web 2.0 sites, especially Facebook, complicate matters (Boyd 2008). Randomly sampling users from Networked Social Media sites and messaging them directly is a possible strategy. However, sending messages unsolicited to large quantities of users selected randomly runs the risk of appearing as 'spam' and as intrusive, and can contravene the rules of the sites under study.

The groups hosted by sites like Facebook on the surface seem an attractive proposition as a means of contacting multiple Facebook users at once to approach them about the research. However, Facebook group messages often go unread, and messages by an unknown outsider may also be perceived as 'spamming'. Because of these issues, the recruitment strategy was supplemented by the use of more group orientated online social media, primarily forums. However, some of the characteristics of the medium itself were also used for recruitment in a networked social media facilitated version of snowballing.

### **Networked 'snowballing'**

While many networked social media sites have a structure that makes it difficult for someone from the outside of the semi-private social networks through which interaction takes place to make an approach without being intrusive, networked

social media make it easy for those situated within the 'nodes' of the network to get a message out to many of their friends and contacts at once. As being part of the social network is a prerequisite for sending out a message to it, access must be gained through a third party, through establishing contact with someone who is well situated within these semi-private networks.

The effectiveness of the snowballing process is enhanced not only by networked social media's ability to quickly and easily send out a mass message asking for research participation, but also by the social ties the respondents will have with the person sending the message, which increases how trustworthy the research is seen as being. Response rates were much higher when one of my prior interviewees sent out a message in their social network asking for participation than when I attempted to contact potential interviewees directly. While establishing trust has been reported by some to be more difficult online (Orgad 2005), perhaps because of the snowballing method, interviewees seemed to trust in the validity of the project. In order to approach interviewees about helping to boost the participation of others in the project, establishing good rapport was an important prerequisite.

### **The use of group based online media**

While many interviewees were recruited via this networked snowballing, group based online media were used to broaden the sample. Group based media, in being designed for more public interaction, provide a potential means of gaining access to a population of potential respondents without being perceived as intrusive. The popularity of networked social media means that a large percentage of Internet users had experience with one or more of the media under study. However, using forums and other groups introduces another difficulty of sampling, as forums have differing populations and focuses and demographics which could overly influence the demographics of the sample.

The strategy for dealing with this was to create a typology of general interests and topics and find an appropriate and popular forum or group for each of these, to

ensure a broad range of people. However, recruitment via forums typically only received a response rate of two or three participants per forum at most. Despite the technically public nature of forums, there was some tendency for forum members to react unhelpfully or even with hostility to an approach from an unknown researcher. Thus, recruitment from forums was sporadic. Of the forums approached, the forum for a general English speaking popular media related website provided the largest number of interviewees, with some also being drawn from a comic forum, and a UK site about television.

### **Diversity of the sample – interviews**

The difficulty of relying only on networked snowballing is that it runs the risk of recruiting a rather homogenous group of potential interviewees. Forum based recruitment was used to address this problem in gaining access to a broader range of respondents. One potential problem of using forum based media for recruitment, however, is a potential over-representation of those particularly invested in online interaction, missing out on those who are more casual users of networked social media. The offline focus groups conducted early in the research provided a useful means of offsetting this potential skewing of the sample.

Recruitment methods were successful in obtaining 42 interviewees from a diverse geographical range and with a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. Around 40 interviews was deemed to be a good number, when supplemented with other methods, to give a rich and varied set of accounts of experiences and opinions. Overall, the sample was also fairly gender balanced, although with somewhat more women than men. One difficulty with using networked snowballing was that individuals tended to have contacts of a roughly similar age and background as themselves. As differing people were involved in the networked snowballing process, this did not result in an overall homogenous sample.

However, the sample did contain a disproportionate amount of people from the US, as well as younger people, and many interviewees also had at least some College or

University education. Additionally, although there was a range of ages, no interviewees were successfully recruited who were older than 50. This could be considered evidence of inequalities in access to online media. However, a far greater diversity of educational level and age was observable in the random samples of networked social media profiles used in observation. This is likely, then, an effect of the particular demographics of the sites used for sampling and of the use of networked snowballing. Several interviewees expressed that part of their motivation to help with the research was that they empathised with being a student with a project, so this aspect likely also increased the proportion of students and former students who became involved.

**Table 1.** gives a list of interviewees and their demographic details, where known, as well as the focus group users who will be quoted in the thesis.

**Table 1: Interviewee details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality/location</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Amanda</b>	22	Australia	Unemployed	Female
<b>Anne</b>	23	US/Finland	Student	Female
<b>Ashley</b>	45	US	Unknown	Female
<b>Ben</b>	21	Wales	Student	Male
<b>Bianca</b>	22	US	Student	Female
<b>Callum</b>	23	US (OR)	Student	Male
<b>Chris</b>	20	US	Tech support	Male
<b>Claire</b>	24	US	Call centre worker	Female
<b>Eduard</b>	40	Germany	Unknown	Male
<b>Elliot</b>	42	England	Unknown	Male
<b>Emma</b>	22	US (CA)	Unemployed	Female
<b>Fiona</b>	20	US	Unknown	Female
<b>Gemma</b>	20	US	Student	Female
<b>Gordon</b>	42	Scotland	Nurse	Male
<b>Helena</b>	35	US	Unknown	Female

<b>Jahi</b>	36	Egypt/US	Network engineer	Male
<b>James</b>	23	US (CA)	Unemployed	Male
<b>Jennifer</b>	19	US	Student	Female
<b>Johan</b>	21	Finland	Student	Male
<b>June</b>	33	US	Actuary	Female
<b>Kylie</b>	27	US (FL)	Disney world worker	Female
<b>Lily</b>	35	US (FL)	Accountant	Female
<b>Liza</b>	21	US (MA)	Student	Female
<b>Lydia</b>	35	US	Bio-archeologist	Female
<b>Marissa</b>	43	US	Unemployed	Female
<b>Mary</b>	22	US	Shoe shop worker	Female
<b>Mercedes</b>	21	Philippines/US (CA)	Artist	Female
<b>Mike</b>	26	US	Student	Male
<b>Natalie</b>	32	The Netherlands	Cruise ship worker	Female
<b>Oliver</b>	23	US (FL)	Gas station attendant	Male
<b>Paul</b>	21	US	Student	Male
<b>Pete</b>	24	Canada	Unemployed	Male
<b>Ralf</b>	42	Canada/Germany	Engineer	Male
<b>Robert</b>	25	US	Legal secretary	Male
<b>Robin</b>	33	US	Town planning	Female
<b>Sandra</b>	19	US (Hawaii)	Student	Female
<b>Sarah</b>	41	US (OR)	Housewife	Female
<b>Thea</b>	25	US (CA)	Trainee teacher	Female
<b>Tim</b>	21	US	Student	Male
<b>Vasily</b>	22	US (PA)/Russia	Student	Female
<b>Yvonne</b>	31	US	Nurse	Female
<b>Zia</b>	20	Canada/Singapore	Student	Female
<b>Jill</b>	-	Scotland	Student	Female
<b>Rebecca</b>	-	England/Scotland	Student	Female
<b>Tomas</b>	-	Germany/Scotland	Student	Male
<b>Inga</b>	21	Kazakhstan/Scotland	Student	Female

<b>Ian</b>	22	Scotland	Student	Male
<b>Kasper</b>	23	Poland/Scotland	Student	Male
<b>Marek</b>	27	Poland/Scotland	Photographer	Male
<b>Margaret</b>	30	Scotland	Economist	Female
<b>Kevin</b>	50	England/Scotland	Unemployed	Male

There were two main age groups of interviewees- a group of younger interviewees in their 20s who were mostly students or unemployed, and an older group in their 30s and 40s, who were typically either stay at home parents or had professional jobs. While respondents were not asked to disclose their sexuality or transgender status, there were several self-identified LGBT respondents, including 6 gay, bisexual or lesbian interviewees and 6 transgender interviewees. The relatively high proportion of transgender participants in the research can be assumed to be in part a reflection of their greater interest in issues of gender and identity online, due to their personal experiences.

The critical perspective taken towards merged audience sites and towards self-branding, and the comparative positivity of many interviewees towards pseudonymous sites, discussed in later chapters, may have been exacerbated by the education levels of the research participants as well as by aspects of their particular identities. Class and age may also have impacted the degree to which site users wished to distance themselves from the aspects of site use considered 'tacky', narcissistic, and associated with young people. Several interviewees, especially transgender interviewees, were quite articulate and aware about theories of gender and identity, which had an obvious influence on how they experienced and thought of gender. As will be explored in later chapters, LGBT people have particular reason to be wary of the kinds of privacy and impression management difficulties caused by merged audience sites, and particular reasons to enjoy the affordances of pseudonymous media. While all these aspects influence the results, they do not necessarily preclude the research results' applicability beyond broader contexts, and they allow for the illustration of particular aspects of the interaction of these sites and their users' identities and perspectives. This does, however, mean caution must be

taken when extrapolating to broader populations, and the specifics of the sample should be borne in mind when considering the research results.

Despite a high concentration of interviewees from the US, combined with interviewees from the UK, East and Western Continental Europe, Australia and the Philippines, differences of nationality were not noticeable in comparison to other differences, such as that of gender, age or sexuality, in terms of their influence on the opinions and attitudes and experiences shared. This is perhaps due to common experiences and common cultural framings of networked social media and online media in general, which tend to bring particular issues- such as authenticity, the limits and potentials of anonymity and identifiability, and the risks of over disclosure, to the fore. Regardless of context, the forms and functions of the sites have similarities in their uses, affordances and limitations.

Interviewees had generally used a broad variety of online media, however, as will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, there was a noticeable difference in attitudes to online interaction between those who mostly used networked social media with a 'merged audience', such as social networking sites, and those who more often used 'pseudonymous' media.

### **Sampling for observation**

With observation, it was possible to use a random method to collect publicly available user profiles. This was considered the best means of obtaining a representative breadth of profiles. Most of the sites studied offered a means of searching public profiles and pages which allowed for an approximation of random sampling. However, with regards to Facebook, the ethical requirement to only sample from publicly available profiles necessarily meant that the sample was missing out on the majority of profiles, which are set to private. Facebook profiles were sampled from a now defunct third party website which provided a means to search through publicly available user profiles.

Whereas for other sites, the sampling methods provided a cross-section of English



speaking site users, the sampling methods used for Facebook drew a sample of mostly, though not exclusively, British site users. Overall this resulted in a sample more diverse in terms of age and educational level than with interviews, with a similar level of geographical diversity. There were notably few openly LGBT people among the public profiles sampled for the research, and none at all on Facebook. Additionally, while few interviewees discussed their religious beliefs, it was noteworthy that Christian religion featured prominently among the profiles of Facebook users outside of Europe, reflecting cultural differences that were not present in interview data.

### **Integrating the methods**

The diversity of the sample in terms of the media used and the demographic characteristics of research participants across the three stages of the research complicated the analytical process. Integrating research results from observation and interviews in particular, given the differences between the groups, presented a challenge for analysis. To help reduce this problem, observation was also carried out of some interviewees' profiles, where the interviewee gave permission and access to do so. This meant that as well as having a general contextualising sample of broader self-presentational and social practices on the site, there was also contextualising observational information about self-presentation and interaction on interviewees' specific networked social media profiles.

Discussion of site users' behaviour, opinions, experiences and conceptualisations will reference interview data more than observational data, as the latter formed more of a means of providing a background contextual set of data about what people do on these sites and how they visually present themselves. Throughout discussion of the research findings, observational data will be used to provide background contextualising data, without being referenced in detail.

### **Discussing site differences**

One difficulty of integration in discussing and analysing data was the differences which emerged in attitudes between users of different media in the research. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, it emerged during the research that there was a strong distinction between the potentials, limitations, uses and affordances of two broad types of media, which I term ‘merged audience’ and ‘pseudonymous’ sites. Because these differences are so relevant to what will be discussed in proceeding chapters, it is necessary to define these in more detail, and clarify which of the sites studied in the research are encapsulated within these boundaries.

**Merged audience sites** are sites which mainly involve interaction with a ‘merged audience’ of contacts from various social contexts, lack anonymity and prioritise contact within pre-existing social networks. The social networking sites studied in the research are ‘merged audience sites’, and they are the most prominent example of this type of site, although some other Web 2.0 networked social media, like Twitter, can also involve a merged audience. Typically, a merged audience will involve friends, family, co-workers, strong and weak ties, and this creates some complications for impression management (Marwick and Boyd 2010; Boyd 2007; Paparcharissi 2011).

I use ‘**pseudonymous sites**’ as shorthand to refer to those sites which do not typically involve interaction with a merged audience and which allow for semi-anonymity through the use of pseudonymous usernames and avatars. These tend to involve interaction with strangers and the formation of new social ties, rather than being used to interact only with pre-existing contacts. They have a differing relationship with the audience as a consequence. Within Web 2.0 networked social media, pseudonymous sites include Flickr and DeviantArt, which are included in the research, and some sites which were not sampled from in the research, such as Tumblr. The majority of sites outside of Web 2.0 are pseudonymous, but only some of these are peripherally included in the research due to interviewees’ uses of them, including forums, and the virtual world Second Life.

Internet users are often drawn to these sites for differing reasons and use them for

differing purposes, and they can play different roles in individuals' lives. In discussing the interaction of site features and site uses and affordances, it is important to avoid the deterministic suggestion that a person's use of a particular site is all that determines their attitude towards online interaction and identity online. Site use must be understood as motivated by and integrated within the broader contexts of users' lives and identities, rather than separated from it.

There is also a dialectical relationship between a site's features, its users, and the typical uses to which the site is put (Boyd 2008). While site features shape their potential uses and purposes and affect who initially joins and why, the audience of users that they attract over time and the reasons they join have an effect on what is actually possible on these sites, and upon what uses are seen as legitimate and supportable.

Despite their differences, boundaries between pseudonymous and merged audience sites are somewhat blurred as it is possible, if often against the site rules, for example, to use a pseudonym on some merged audience sites, or to use your given name and create a merged audience on a site where pseudonyms are possible. Twitter can be used to gather together a merged audience known in other contexts, but it also offers the potential for pseudonymous contact. However, the terms encapsulate broad differences in the types of typical configurations of audience and levels of anonymity which are commonly supported by these different sites.

A further blurring occurs when talking about differences between users of these sites, as all interviewees in the research had used at least one form of merged audience site. To clarify, where I make a distinction between the attitudes of 'merged audience site users' and 'pseudonymous site users' I am referring to differences between those who primarily or exclusively described using merged audience sites and those who primarily used pseudonymous sites. Because the differences between these sites and the attitudes of their users were so significant, generally, results relating to these sites will be discussed separately, excepting in cases where the distinction is not relevant.

Certain sections and chapters of this thesis concentrate in particular upon one type of

media more than others. Merged audience sites will be discussed in more detail, with pseudonymous sites used as a point of contrast. This is because part of the reason for comparing the two is addressing research questions that require investigating the changes that merged audience sites have brought to online interaction.

The beginning chapter on narrative will mostly deal with practices which predominate on merged audience sites, due to the differences in the potentials and purposes between sites, and because social networking site statuses have a particular focus on narrativisation of the everyday which has relevance to the research questions. Photographs of the self are more commonly used on merged audience social media as a means of self-presentation, so in discussing visual representation, merged audience sites predominate, although the use of taste in self-presentation will be discussed with respect to both types of site. The authenticity chapter is the chapter which explores in detail the distinctions and similarities between these types of site and their uses and their differing affordances, which are linked to the differing conceptions of authenticity and self they encourage. In discussing gender, distinctions between merged audience and pseudonymous site types are also highly relevant, and will be referenced where appropriate. The conclusion will include a summation of the relevant differences between the two and the differences they make to online interaction, gender and self-presentation.

## **Ethics**

While research organisations such as the Association Of Internet Researchers have provided ethical guidelines for conducting Internet research, there is still some lack of consensus on how ethics apply to research conducted online (Ess 2002; Hookway 2008; Markham and Buchanan 2012). The concern has always been with how to determine what could be seen as ‘public’ enough to research and what is ‘private’ enough to be out of bounds. Online data is often publicly available, and although some researchers posit that this ‘publicness’ means that data can be collected and quoted without consent (Hookway 2008), many researchers argue that Internet users do not themselves conceive of it as truly ‘public’, or think of it as public only for

limited purposes (Hookway 2008; Sveningsonn Elm 2009).

Networked social media themselves have been suggested to have a blurring effect of the boundaries of public and private. However, while many of them, particularly merged audience sites, represent a mainstreaming of the semi-public posting of personal details and experiences, they have also encouraged public discourse and awareness about privacy concerns on the Internet to a hitherto unprecedented degree (Boyd 2010; Dwyer et al 2007). This was reflected in the responses of interviewees, who often described merged audience networked social media as particularly encouraging risky over disclosure, compared to pseudonymous but more technically public and accessible pseudonymous online environments such as forums.

Determining the placing of each site on a private-public continuum requires looking at how open it is to access, and how much group interaction with strangers is ordinary in the space. Another important but difficult criteria to determine, is how private or public users themselves view their interaction. It is possible for an online space to be public but 'feel' private to its users, and vice versa (Sveningsonn Elm 2009).

While online interviews could use the same ethical procedures as offline interviews, the scale of data collection for observation made obtaining consent for observation, coding and analysis impractical. In order to minimise ethical concerns, all the data collected in this research was from publicly available profiles, with the exception of some private data obtained with prior consent from its creators. It is likely that this data, while technically publicly available, would not be perceived as such by all site users.

Avoiding quoting and displaying material without permission, and respecting privacy, was particularly important as many Internet users do not realise that there are any ethical standards which might discourage researchers from quoting and displaying photographs and text and images from online media, or even purposefully misleading and tricking Internet users for 'experimental' purposes. Thus, there is,

among some Internet users and communities- including some approached in the research- a perception that researchers online are exploitative or manipulative in character, using and recontextualising other people's material without care for their privacy. This mistrust is not entirely baseless, due to some past research which treated publicly available material as fully quotable (Carusi and De Grandis 2011; Sveningsson Elm 2009), and due to a tendency for students in some fields to conduct projects online without a full understanding of the ethical issues involved, and without consulting existing ethical guidelines.

It is important for future research and as good sociological practice, to help to address this mistrustful relationship between Internet users and researchers by establishing stronger guidelines which guard against the display of material without permission, and making potential research respondents aware of these ethical standards. It was thus particularly important to make it clear to potential respondents that nothing of what they shared online was going to be quoted without their permission, and to make it clear what the interview data would be used for.

Interviewees were asked to give their informed consent to be interviewed and quoted by being emailed or messaged a consent form, which made clear that their responses would be totally anonymised, and were only going to be used for the purposes of the PhD and related articles. They could indicate their acceptance of this by messaging back with a statement that they agreed. This provides an adequate substitute for a signature in linking their agreement to their account on a particular site and in providing a record of agreement. Interviewees were not automatically sent the research findings, but were made aware that they could contact me for further information about the project and its progress. In some cases, due to the interviewee's interest, an agreement was made to let the interviewee know about any future published articles, and some interviewees also asked me about my findings so far, which I summarised for them.

Since it was important to avoid the display of material without permission, this curtailed the amount of direct quotes and visual material from observational data that

could be used in the PhD, because of the difficulties of attaining the consent of all the participants involved in interactions on profile pages. Using the observational data from public profiles without making the content in any way identifiable, and without quoting or displaying anything without permission, was considered for my research to be the best compromise between respecting and protecting site users' privacy while also gaining a rich amount of data and material. The observational data obtained from public profiles will only be referenced in a general sense, without reference to any specific individual profile. Because of the potential intrusiveness of asking Facebook users about the use of photographs of themselves kept on semi-private networks, to obtain the example photographs displayed in chapter 4, interviewees' photographs were supplemented with content marked as publicly available on other sites such as Flickr and DeviantArt, and permission was sought for the use of all photographs. Additionally, in order to protect data and privacy, data was anonymised, and kept in an encrypted folder on the computer used in the research. The real names of many interview respondents were not known to me, so there was a certain amount of inherent anonymity in the process of online interviewing, but to further this, I replaced the usernames in interview data with different pseudonyms. For those who allowed their photographs to be displayed in the thesis, I obtained permission to use their name or a pseudonym of their choice to credit their photographs in the bibliography.

While none of the questions asked by the research required investigating anything particularly sensitive or personal, there was some need nonetheless to also consider the power relationship between myself as an interviewer and interviewees who were sometimes disclosing quite personal and sensitive information. One aspect of the researcher-respondent relationship which gave me cause for reflection on the power relationships involved, was that many interviewees who shared their personal experiences in the research were LGBT, including several transgender people. There has been some historical tendency in research for transgender people in particular to be treated as interesting for what they say about gender processes in a broader sense, and how they reflect upon cisgender people (Hines 2006; Namaste 1996). This sometimes results in an analytical approach which treats them as experimental cases

rather than as individuals, and neglects the importance of their personal experiences and viewpoints (Namaste 1996; Reicherzer et al 2013). Some writers have expressed frustrations at the ways in which they have felt exoticised, excluded from or othered by sociological discussions of gender, and have criticised the lack of LGBT voices and perspectives in considering issues of gender and sexuality (Hines 2006; Namaste 1996).

Evidently, those who participated in the research did so in the full knowledge of what use I might make of what they disclosed. However, to respect these critiques of sociological approaches to gender, I avoided treating transgender experiences of gender as a special case that illuminated particular things about gender, while respecting and illustrating the specifics of their experiences and perspectives and uses of the internet. Additionally, when interviewing people who disclosed being transgender, I avoided asking them questions that rested upon an assumption of a different experience or perspective simply due to being transgender.



### **Chapter 3: Self, audience, experience- narrative?**

“What’s on your mind?” “What are you doing right now?” “What’s happening?” “What’s your mood?” These are questions social networking and micro-blogging sites prompt their users to answer in their statuses and blog posts.

As users of networked social media answer these questions and share details of themselves, their lives, emotions, tastes and experiences, they are involved in a process of self-presentation which inherently involves sharing stories of self and experience. With their unprecedented 'egocentric' self-referential (Boyd 2007) focus on telling stories of everyday experience for an audience of friends and contacts, the social networking site status encourages the “externalisation of the previously private aspects of lived existence” which Beer and Burrows call an “ongoing codification of habitus” (Beer and Burrows 2007:3.4, 1.2). However, aligning it with the unreflexive, sedimented dispositions of ‘habitus’ seems to understate the reflexive choices being made as to what to reveal and what to prioritise in the presentation of self and experience. This provokes the question of what motivates the choices as to what is shared, and, more broadly, of the relationship between experience and its mediation within site statuses, and between self, content and audience in the social yet egocentric nodes of the social media site.

Because statuses encourage their users to involve themselves in sharing and constructing stories about everyday experiences, the concept of narrative would seem to bring much to the analysis of networked social media. Narrative is highly relevant to Web 2.0 networked social media given the ways in which these sites can be said to extend and exemplify the heightened attention to reflexivity and narrative considered by Giddens and others to be a key feature of contemporary society (Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Lawler 2008; Lash 1994). For Giddens “the reflexive project of the self... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives” and “auto-biography - particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned... - is actually at the

core of self-identity in modern social life” (1991:9, 76).

This chapter will investigate and apply and adapt the concept of narrative to the mediated accounts of experience shared on networked social media sites, investigating the extent to which social media statuses can be considered as personal narratives of experience and identity.

For the purposes of this chapter, drawing on definitions by Bruner (2001) and Somers (1993) Riceour (1985) and others, a personal narrative will be described as a story a person tells about themselves which: (1) uses emplotment, is sequential, linking together disparate events in time with coherent linkages; (2) is 'tellable'- that is, exceptional enough to be a story 'worth telling'; and (3) represents a retrospective 'summing up' and 'making sense' of an experience, with an evaluative character, which brings 'closure' to the narrative. Due to the characteristics of social networking site statuses, which differ from many of the types of narratives studied in other research, the chapter will also draw upon the distinction Bamberg (2004) makes between 'big story' narratives- which more closely fit the above definition of 'narrative' and sum up and evaluate experience, and 'small story' narratives, which are more fragmented, everyday and conversational.

The chapter will also evaluate to what extent the practice of sharing and disclosing aspects of life and experience encourages or extends a 'heightened reflexivity' towards experience and an increased tendency to view life in narrative terms. Thus, the chapter will evaluate how tellable, exceptional and sequential statuses are and how much they encourage retrospection and reflexivity, as well as looking at to what extent they are constructed and evaluated according to recognisable narrative norms and standards. Exploring the points at which these accounts converge and diverge with theorised aspects of personal narratives, it will apply and adapt the concept of narrative and narrativisation in a way which takes into account the fragmented, short, discontinuous, phatic nature of social media statuses.

In examining narrative, the chapter will explore what site users actually share about

themselves and their lives and why, how much they consider the audience for what they share, and how they judge the stories others tell about themselves and their lives. While not all of these aspects determine directly how applicable narrative is to statuses, they do give insight into what motivates users to narrativise experiences and feelings, and into the narrative standards and norms by which statuses are constructed and evaluated.

Local circumstances and ‘narrative norms’ can provide differing sets of “coherence structures, which work like language games that are locally available for casting selves in preferred ways, with particular themes and plot lines” (Linde 1993 in Holstein and Gubrium 2000:104; Somers 1994). Thus, the chapter will involve an examination of the extent to which there are identifiable narrative standards and norms on networked social media sites which are used as a means of evaluating, understanding and judging the accounts of experience given by others. Narrative standards are defined here as the standards text must meet in order to be seen in a context as a legitimate narrative, while narrative norms are concepts which are repeatedly invoked as a means of framing, discussing and evaluating a person's own narrative texts and that of others, often in a way that has a particularly normative, evaluative character.

As narrative is not only a term that is applied to the process of story telling, but is theorised to be part of how identities are formed and sustained, this chapter will examine narrative as an aspect of the links between the self and the social. Theorists of narrative identity consider identity itself to be created and structured through narrative, as individuals build a sense of self through the stories they tell about themselves and engage with broader cultural narratives in doing so (Bamberg 2004; Brockmeier and Harré 2001; Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; McNay 2000; Riceour 1985; Somers 1994; Taylor 1989). They thus conceptualise the relationship between structure and agency, self and society as involving an interplay of personal and cultural narratives. Personal narratives, as autobiographical accounts, draw from and are constructed with relation to what can be called cultural narratives or ‘public narratives’- “those narratives attached to cultural and institutional

formations larger than the single individual, to inter-subjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro- or macro-stories about American social mobility, the ‘freeborn Englishman,’ the ‘working-class hero’, and so on” (Somers 1994:619). For the purposes of this thesis 'cultural narratives' will be further defined as recurring common cultural 'stories' about particular cultural practices, categories of identity, types of people, or events- a subcategory of discourse which is structured by a narrative form.

Narrativisation will be described, following Somers (1993), as the process of telling stories about self and experience, building personal narratives and making sense of the position of the self with reference to cultural narratives. In recognition of this, the chapter will examine the interplay of personal and cultural narratives in networked social media site use, as an aspect of how individuals meet with cultural narratives in their personal stories and evaluate the stories told by others.

The chapter will develop a conception of statuses as fragmented ‘micro-narratives’, which build up cumulatively over time into larger accounts which are evaluated by site users according to some narrative standards and norms, particularly an overarching concern for authenticity and balance. It will finish with an overview of what networked social media illuminate about the process of narrative construction and what the concept of narrative brings to analysis of reflexive processes of making meaning of self and identity and its relationship with culture.

### **Narratives and social media**

Given their self-referential focus on the production over time of accounts of self and experience, it is surprising that sociological research into Web 2.0 networked social media has not often used the concept of narrative identity, or of narrative, generally drawing instead on notions of identity as performance, though there have been studies of narrative on other online media (Leonardi 2009).

Narrative examinations of online media have often focused on media such as blogs

which give more space for the construction of accounts of self and experience and are often diary-like in form. All of the sites studied in the research organise their content, whether textual or visual, in chronological fashion, but the space offered for accounts of experience differs from the short tweet or status to the near essay length of the DeviantArt journal or MySpace blog post. Because of the differences in structural possibilities and purposes between statuses and longer pieces, analysis in this chapter will deal mainly with the use of short statuses on social networking sites. The comparatively shorter space given in the social networking site status complicates the process of applying narrative theories to these online spaces, but this in itself makes them of interest as potential spaces for new kinds of narrativisation (Leonardi 2009). Data relating to longer narratives will be briefly summarised at the end of this chapter as a point of contrast.

Some studies have dealt with the constrained narrative spaces available on micro-blogging sites such as Twitter. For example, Oulasvirta et al's study of micro-blogging stresses how users of micro-blogging sites concentrate on the "rapid disclosure of current activities" and experiences, "making the ordinary visible" (2010:238) for their audience in a way that prioritises the immediacy of the media-the connection to 'right now'. Micro-bloggers in their study were seen as engaging in self-disclosure and mundane postings in a way which invited reciprocal conversational exchange with other users, which served to give feedback and motivate further disclosure and social engagement.

Marwick and Boyd's study of Twitter deals with the ambiguities and ambivalences which can occur surrounding the relationship between the Twitter poster and their audience, and the way this creates a need to balance 'authentic' self-disclosure with a need for more calculated impression management (Marwick and Boyd 2010). Azariah's study of travel bloggers on Twitter stresses the ways in which Twitter users blend genres in their postings, drawing on different "speech genres" (Bakhtin, 1986, in Azariah 2011) and narrative tropes from different contexts. Leonardi's study of narrative identity on Facebook represents a comprehensive attempt at adapting narrative concepts to social networking sites. Her work approaches identity as a

“fragmented online narrative performance”, blending concepts of “cultural capital”, self-presentation, and of identity as performance (2009: 26).

These studies highlight the unique features of merged audience social media statuses, stressing that as personal accounts, these narratives are disclosed among semi-public social networks and involve interactions and conversational exchanges with an audience. They stress the need to take into account the relationship between self and audience in the construction of narratives and ways in which statuses can involve shared meaning making through reciprocal social exchanges as users’ personal narratives intersect with others. They also highlight the ambiguous relationships that the truncated space of the short status post has with other genres of interaction and communication, and some of the difficulties this causes.

### **Trends in the sharing of experiences**

When asked simply about what kinds of statuses they made on social networking sites, interviewees' answers did not just refer to the content of their statuses, but to how much of their lives and experiences they shared in statuses, and to how much they considered their audience. These seem to be inseparable aspects of how users think about choosing what to put in their statuses, due to the social yet egocentric structure of the merged audience site.

Thus, in investigating how statuses can be usefully examined in narrative terms, it is important to take into account what users share about themselves and their lives and why, but also the orientation they have towards the 'audience' with which they share these statuses, and how this influences what they share. In investigating this, this section will look at how much site users consider the 'tellability' of what they share, and how 'exceptional' the experiences they choose to share tend to be, as well as at the breadth and depth of how much they disclose about their lives. While this is only partly directly relevant to whether or not these statuses meet criteria of narrative, this is relevant to investigating the extent to which statuses involve an ongoing narrativisation of everyday experience, as well as how much statuses represent a

conscious effort to construct an account for an audience, with reference to narrative standards and norms. All narratives can be assumed to be constructed with an audience in mind (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), but the particularly phatic nature of social networking sites and the qualities of the merged audience make the question of how the audience and the criteria of 'tellability' influences what is shared particularly relevant. Examination of the uses and motivations users have for telling the stories they do and how much they meet the narrative standards of tellability, sequentiality and emplotment will culminate in an elaboration of the particularly unique position of statuses, which complicate viewing them in narrative terms.

There were four broad identifiable trends in attitudes towards the sharing of experiences, opinions and emotions among social networking site users, in terms of how much they shared about their lives and why, and how this was influenced by considerations of audience.

Nearly all interviewees expressed a concern for tellability- for considering 'who would want to know', as one interviewee put it, suggesting that statuses are mostly constructed 'to be read', and in adherence to the basic narrative standard of tellability. However, this is not to say that most interviewees concentrated on sharing only the 'exceptional' aspects of their lives.

One significant group of interviewees described themselves as mainly sharing mundane information about daily experiences, such as social events, travel, and minor trials and tribulations relating to weather, work or their family. These site users typically used these sites frequently but described their site use in casual terms, tending to frame their statuses as unimportant and unexceptional. An example is this statement from Ian, a 22 year old student from Edinburgh that-

“You talk about the night out you had the night before and stuff like that. Generally it’s just nonsense, stuff that goes on, just stuff as it happens... Because again Facebook is like short updates.”

Another typical example is given by this comment from Johan, a 21 year old student

and activist from Finland:

“I usually mention if I'm going somewhere, had a great meal, have some commentary on recent events, thought of a good joke. It's mostly on a personal level, but I don't tend to involve emotions that much. I keep my bad days to myself mostly.”

As well as describing mostly disclosing everyday experience, there was a tendency for this group to describe actively *avoiding* deeper disclosure and avoiding the disclosure of private, significant feelings and emotions. For example, Lydia, a 35 year old bio-archeologist living in the US, commented that she posted mostly-

“Day-to-day happenings... What I am thinking about? yes. What I am feeling? Not really. I don't talk about feelings much in general. I am the antithesis of touchy-feely.”

The second largest group of interviewees had a keen interest in 'tellability', in that they described their recounting of experiences as orientated mostly towards being entertaining and interesting to their potential audience. The general attitude of this group is well summarised by a comment by Mike, a 26 year old unemployed man from the US, that “if I find something interesting, chances are some of my friends will, too.” Humour was a commonly referenced way of attempting to ‘make the ordinary entertaining’, though interviewees were usually somewhat self-deprecatory about their ability to use it. Rebecca, a PhD student from England commented- “I like status updates because you can try and be witty, normally feebly.” These site users’ statuses were intended to stand alone by themselves as something humorous, rather than being a means of simply communicating everyday happenings with others.

The above two groups constituted the majority of interviewees, spread across all demographics of age, gender and occupation. Users in these groups tended also to share a common, casual orientation towards using social networking sites, using them daily to 'keep in touch with friends', without describing themselves as being heavily invested in presenting themselves and interacting on these sites.



Related to the notion of being entertaining, yet more orientated towards a particular interest, some related mostly reporting on experiences relevant to a particular area of their interest or identity. For example, June, a 33 year old actuary from Denver in the US stated:

“I'll post updates about my son and funny things that he does or milestones he hits - a lot of my mom friends are interested in that sort of thing, and we all comment on each other's. I don't really post about my "feelings". I'll post about plans I have, or even mundane details about the day sometimes.”

Here there is a specific group she has in mind as interested in what's going on due to their shared experiences and identities as mothers, and there is a mutual process of sharing and commenting between profiles. Such users tended to be quite invested in contact with a specific friend group as opposed to lower investment in contact with a more general group of acquaintances. This was somewhat more common with female interviewees over 30, possibly reflecting differences in friendship patterns and social networks across age groups, which may also be affected by gender. Locality had a rather complex interaction with this, as some interviewees in this category sought contact with like-minded friends in disparate locations precisely because it was hard to find like-minded people in their locality, whereas others, particularly mothers, used them for contact with people they also interacted with in the local area.

A small group of interviewees described the use of statuses and posts as being about the disclosure of 'exceptional' and significant life experiences or emotions. Jahi, a 36 year old Egyptian software engineer living in the US, had found the use of social media to be particularly important to him during the Egyptian revolution, in order to keep contact with his family and read about their experiences:

“I posted about how I feel, like I wished [to be] back home with all the young people. Also, I posted a lot of news links and articles with analysis of what was happening, and lastly my own opinions and suggestions.”

Mercedes, a 21 year old art student from the Philippines, living in California with her family, recounted that she only tended to use social networking sites to share extreme negative emotions and experiences that she particularly wanted her family to know

about. She felt that- “it's the only way I can get people near me to pay attention” and the public nature of it was specifically of use in making it so that her family would take notice, as it made them publicly accountable to what she deemed a “cry for help”. Notably those in this group often felt themselves, for reasons of physical or emotional distance, unable to communicate what they wanted to express by other means, and this heightened the importance of social networking sites as a communication medium.

Very few interviewees reported a total disregard for the audience's interest, but there was a small group who disregarded tellability, viewing their statuses as being primarily a place for venting minor complaints. This is exemplified in the comment from Vasily, a 22 year old American student of Russian, that she used her statuses for “the same complaining everyone does.” This type of attitude was more common among those who placed a very low value on their use of these sites and did not use them often, suggesting that a concern for tellability and for audience interest is part of a rewarding engagement with these sites.

Overall, then, site users generally considered tellability in constructing their statuses, but varied in how much they disclosed about their lives and emotions, and in the extent to which they orientated their content with an audience in mind. Many considered tellability yet were not directly motivated by the perceived interest of their audience and shared everyday, unexceptional experiences, but made a point of avoiding in-depth disclosure, whereas others attempted particularly to interest and entertain their audience, while a minority were motivated by a need to use these sites to communicate significant experiences that could not be easily expressed via other means. That the social networking site becomes a site for significant emotional disclosure only in circumstances where there is felt to be no other outlet for expressing it, suggests these sites are not typically seen as places for in-depth emotional disclosure.

Observational data, based on the coding of profiles, supported the interview evidence that the above attitudes to disclosure are common trends in social networking site use

and further showed that social networking site users generally have a consistent approach to the amount and type of data they share. Some interviewees themselves made claims that some had differing and consistent approaches to disclosure, for example Ben, a 22 year old Literature student studying in Wales, commented:

“I think some people treat them as quite personal sites, whereas others are quite reserved. I think I was somewhere in between.”

Oulasvirta et al examine disclosure in networked social media “along two dimensions: depth (or level of intimacy) and breadth (amount of information)”. Social networking site users typically showed consistency in their sets of posts on both these levels, though the ‘breadth’ of information was limited, as in Oulasvirta et al’s study, by the short length of statuses which, “discourage expression of complicated ideas and emotions” (2010: 238). However, individuals would often elaborate on an initially vague status in subsequent comments after inquiries from others. Overall there was often a conversational’ aspect to statuses, where friends and contacts made jokes, gave advice and support, and shared their own experiences in an exchange of comments (Boyd 2007; Stutzman 2007).

While the majority of site users in observation, as in interviews, concentrated on the disclosure of mundane everyday experiences of low tellability, the disclosure of significant experiences could provide a means, as in the case of Mercedes, of attaining social support. In observational data, the disclosure of negative experiences, whether significant or mundane, was considerably more common than the sharing of positive ones, which supports some interviewees’ characterisation of statuses as weighted towards complaints.

Overall there seemed to be some consistency of ‘tone’ as well as levels of disclosure and orientation towards the audience. Humour was frequently used in the disclosure of mundane experiences, as well as to frame opinions and emotions in a more entertaining format. Commonly, these were formed by prefacing and fitting content into conventional humorous phrases such as ‘have you ever noticed how?’ or ‘don’t you just hate it when?’ to transform the everyday into a more recognisably

‘entertaining’ form.

Despite some consistency of tone, level of disclosure and orientation to the audience, there are discontinuous aspects to how statuses are constructed and received, and they are not usually sequential. Statuses were generally commented on individually as if they stood alone, although sometimes later statuses would give an update on subjects brought up in earlier ones. Sometimes shifts of tone could occur between statuses when individuals ‘broke’ from their ‘usual’ tone, such as breaking from a joking tone to a serious one due to a significant experience. For example, Lily a 35 year old part time accountant from Connecticut, whose statuses were often in a joking tone, broke from the usual joking tone to say something more emotional- “exhausted. Leaving tomorrow, excited, but a little bit sad. Mostly excited. Ready for the beach! Ciao Houston!” Her next post was unrelated and humourous, sharing a cartoon which pointed out the ‘mind blowing’ fact that 3.14 in mirror image spells ‘pie’. Those making comments responded in kind to the established tone and the subject matter of the post, rather than carrying over comments on her life changes to the status about Pi. Discontinuity is thus an accepted and ordinary feature of the ‘fragmented’ nature of these accounts.

### **Networked social media statuses as narratives?**

The preceding section has identified several characteristics of social networking site statuses and their uses, relevant to the extent to which they fit conceptions of narrative. As we have seen, to varying degrees, and in somewhat differing ways, consideration of the audience had a strong effect on what experiences were shared. Consideration of what Oulasvirta et al define as “tellability” -of ‘who would want to know’ as one interviewee put it- was an important motivator for many as to whether or not to write about an experience (2010).

Social networking site users have somewhat differing ideas about what constitutes an appropriate level of self-disclosure. Many social networking site users use their statuses to give updates of day to day experiences of relatively low tellability, while

avoiding in-depth disclosure of their emotions and feelings, showing that the “externalisation of the previously private aspects of existence” online has its limits (Beer and Burrows 2007). Statuses may invite attention and initiate conversation and serve as a means of social support, but the social networking site status seems expected, to some degree, to be able to stand alone as something ‘tellable’ and ‘coherent’ in itself.

This shows that some narrative standards apply to the sharing of experiences- that the status is meant ‘to be read’ by others as a narrative. Site users often keep a consistent level of disclosure and a consistent tone in terms of the discursive conventions they draw upon. However, statuses are discontinuous and do not generally involve an attempt to continue on in a coherent continuous narrative from the previous status.

In so far as they constitute personal accounts of individuals’ lives and experiences and emotions, and build up a chronological selective autobiographical account over time, and are to some degree constructed ‘to be ‘read’, statuses and tweets fit the definition of personal narrative, and involve the narrativisation of self and experience. However, in several ways, they lack some of the features of personal narratives as theorised by Somers (1993) and others. For example, distinct from more organised life narratives, they are short, discontinuous and fragmented, and there is no attempt to draw them together into a coherent, meaningful account over time (Leonardi 2009). As self-reflexive accounts, narratives are typically created with some sort of audience in mind, even if the audience consists only of the author themselves. However, there is a social, interactional component to social media statuses which is not present within many other forms of textual autobiographical accounts. They blend aspects of narrative and conversation.

Statuses are ‘phatic’ and socially orientated, yet while they share the discontinuous, fragmented and phatic aspects of conversation, they lack conversation’s immediate feedback, and leave their traces over time rather than vanishing in the moment (Marwick and Boyd 2010; Oulasvirta et al 2009). Neither fully analogous to the fragmented narratives of face-to-face conversation nor longer textual auto-

biographical narratives, statuses often are intended to be initially coherent and 'tellable', yet have a limited ability to involve 'causal emplotment', defined by Somers as an aspect of narrative (1994), and have a different relationship to time.

Personal narratives are always in a sense 'retrospective' in that they represent an account of an event which has already occurred (Taylor 1989). Emplotment in personal narratives involves the "selective appropriation" of disparate experiences into an account that has some explanatory or evaluative quality of explaining the causal links between events and between the past and present of the protagonist (Somers 1994). Often this emplotment will draw upon wider narrative conventions and will involve an evaluation of the self over time with reference to cultural narratives (Brockmeier and Harré 2001; Somers 1994).

On social networking sites, the relationship between an experience and its narrative mediation differs from other forms of auto-biographical accounts. Statuses usually refer to current happenings, rather than involving an extensive summation of past experience, yet incrementally build up a viewable archive of past happenings, potentially provoking reflections upon experiences and life changes over time. Jurgensson has suggested these media fixate "the present as always a potential documented past" (2011: para 2). To further explore the narrative characteristics of statuses and their relationship to time and emplotment, the following sections will evaluate the extent to which they involve both retrospective summations of the past and the reflexive narrativisation of the ongoing moment.

### **Looking back- narratives as retrospective?**

There is not much space for extensive reflection and retrospective 'summing up' in the space of the individual social networking site status. However, often statuses do not simply report upon but also evaluate experiences and feelings, and in this sense contain a limited amount of emplotment. For example, this status by Mercedes does not simply report on a work party and its aftermath, but also concludes with a retrospective evaluation of it, that extends to a broader positive statement of care for

those she spent it with, and indeed of her current feelings about life:

"Wow, did I JUST get home? Yes. Yes I did. All in all, it was a great Friday/Saturday combo for me. I love working with people that I like and genuinely care about. Life is good."

Where such an experience involved others in the person's social network, there is the potential for others to bring in their own respective evaluations and experiences of the event. Her friends and colleagues' reactions in comments affirmed the 'good times' and summed up their experiences as an 'epic weekend', showing how this retrospective quality often also forms a shared kind of mediated memory making (Van Dijk 2008), and a shared expression of affect. Many statuses which described experiences followed the pattern shown here in starting with the specific experience and following with an evaluation, suggesting some following of narrative standards of going from a descriptive beginning to an evaluative conclusion.

In this limited sense of evaluating recent experiences and linking individual experiences to overall evaluations of events and friendships, statuses often do involve a kind of retrospective evaluation of recent experiences. However, because these sites build up an archived past over time, the question is raised of how much site users 'look back' further into their archived pasts and evaluate the cumulative effect of their own statuses and those of others.

Site users were conscious of the cumulative impression they gave over time from their statuses. However, rather than seeing the archival aspects of these sites as aiding their understanding of themselves over time, interviewees often expressed concerns about how this archive would look to others given the ways in which priorities, identities and the social contexts of self-presentation change over a person's life course. For example, Robin, a 33 year old government worker in the US commented:

"I'm grateful that social media sites weren't around when I was in high school and college. There's no telling what I might have put online."

Lily mentioned that when she looked back on her past posts, she would "often

cringe” because she was caught up in a particular emotional state due to personal circumstances that she no longer felt connected to. There was concern that changing purposes in life and changing priorities would create a disconnect between their past and current presentation of themselves which would persist in this archive and “haunt the writer with the passage of time” (Zhao et al 2008:1826; Boyd 2007).

A concern about risky 'inappropriate' disclosure was often linked by interviewees- including young people themselves- to a concern for how young people in particular might engage in risky over disclosure. This links to the rhetoric of the 'digital native', which often suggests young people are simultaneously more technologically savvy while more complacent about the risks of online interaction, which often presents a rather distorted, exaggerated picture of the risk of online media for young people (Boyd 2007, 2008; Herring 2006).

Despite their self-referential focus and archival quality, then, interviewees discussed the potential for 'looking back' over past statuses mostly in terms of potential risk, due to the 'persistence' of statuses in time, and their potential interpretation in ways beyond their intent and control. Lack of control over the interpretation others might make, and over the 'invisible audience' (Boyd 2007, 2008) doing the interpreting, removes site users' control over how others interpret and understand the links between past and present, making it hard for them to control what is made of their own 'story'. Bamberg comments- "the storing of events that leads up to a 'me' in the sense of "this is a sequence of 'I-positions' in the there-and-then, leading up to a 'me' as who I want to be understood", requires a somewhat *conscious* or at least *analytic* focus on consistencies across time, places and actions" (2004:355). This consciousness and analytic focus is not present in the status, which focuses on a particular moment in the present, discontinuous from the last, rather being intended as a coherent life story. Page suggests that the “episodic narrativity of [social networking site statuses] is influenced by the online discourse situation where recency is prized over retrospection” (Page 2010:423).

This concentration on the narrativisation of the recent moment has been considered



by commentators such as Turkle to encourage social networking site users to be *over* reflexive about their experience (2011; Jurgensson 2011). Encouraging people to not simply ‘experience’ life but to narrativise it with an audience and standards of ‘tellability’ in mind (Hand 2012; Jurgensson 2011; Turkle 2011). While sociological perspectives would tend to defuse the negativity in this evaluation, the notion of a heightened reflexivity through narrative has its echoes in the work of Giddens and others (Giddens 1993; Lawler 2008).

However, there was little evidence in interviews of this sort of constant hyper-reflexive attention to narrativisation. Interviewees considered the ‘tellability’ of their experiences and the reactions of the audience, but they did not show this as consciously affecting the way in which they experienced life, with the exception of concerns about the risks of over disclosure. Interviewees in fact generally took a casual attitude towards their use of social networking sites, downplaying their significance despite how often they used them, which linked to a recurring tendency to downplay the role of choice and construction in their statuses and self-presentation.

### **Edited selves, edited experiences**

In describing the relationship between experiences in their lives and the accounts given of these experiences online, it was notable that interviewees did not describe themselves as ‘telling stories’ or as constructing an account of their experiences. Although there is choice involved in selecting which experiences to share, and attention must be given to ‘tellability’ and appropriateness, the sharing of an experience was construed as an authentic, natural happening. What merely had to be decided was not so much how to frame them narratively or consider ‘emplotment’ but which experiences to show and which not to.

This is a subtle distinction to make which nonetheless is indicative of a common tendency for site users to define their experiences and identities as something external to their online mediated representation yet also as naturally reflected through

what is shown online, rather than consciously constructed. The reflexivity and choice encouraged by the selection process of mediating and narrativising experience seemed to encourage a desire to downplay the role of 'choice' and construction and indeed reflexivity in what is shared. This is a key element of the tensions surrounding authenticity threaded through Internet users' conceptions of online social practices, which will be elaborated in later chapters. These tendencies to view the narrativisation process as ideally unreflexive and 'natural', likely encouraged users to downplay the extent to which these media's focus on 'documenting the moment' may have affected how they experience life.

Despite the discontinuous nature of statuses and the lack of attention paid to the archival aspects of social networking sites, interviewees showed that they were conscious of the cumulative impression they were giving of themselves and their lives over time by this process. Interviewees frequently described themselves as giving an accurate but 'edited' picture of their lives and, relatedly, themselves. Lily's description of the picture she gives of her life as "accurate, but incomplete" and Robin's comment that her account is "definitely edited" are examples of this.

### **Social networking site statuses as fragmented micro-narratives**

The concept of narrative requires adaptation, then, to address the fragmented, interactional, discontinuous nature of site statuses and their relationship to time and reflexivity. Statuses do not easily fit traditional concepts of narrative, in lacking continuity and substantial emplotment. Site users downplay the role of choice and construction and reflexivity in what they share, yet their statuses are selected partly with tellability in mind, and users are conscious of the cumulative impression given from what they are share, even if they mostly consider their narrativised past in terms of the risk of its giving a bad impression in the future.

Bamberg points out there has been a tendency for narrative analysis to focus upon 'big story' autobiographical life stories, privileging " 'one active teller' in contrast to 'multiple active co-tellers'; (ii) high 'tellability'... at the expense of low 'tellability';

(iii) detached 'embeddedness' from surrounding talk and activity... over a more contextual and situational 'embeddedness'; (iv) a more certain and constant 'moral stance'... in contrast to a more uncertain and fluid one; and (v)... the closed temporal and causal order over a more open temporal spatial ordering" (Bamberg 2004:356).

He puts forward a case for considering the importance of 'small story' narratives- everyday story telling which is fragmented and does not necessarily follow the neat progression and complex emplotment of a larger story, but which nonetheless does 'position' the storyteller with respect to broader cultural narratives, and can represent a person's identifications with particular identity categories (2004). Bamberg claims that the small stories of everyday experience are more close to experience as it is actually lived- fragmented and disjointed and often co-produced in interaction with others, in contrast to 'big story' life narratives, which require a more reflexive analytical perspective. In being text yet blending in aspects of conversation, social networking site statuses do not neatly fit in as examples of conversational 'small story' narratives as explored by Bamberg. Yet in their shortness, their mundane everyday focus, their variable 'tellability', fragmentation and lack of extensive emplotment, and their co-production between individuals, they have more in common with 'small story' narratives than longer autobiographical 'big stories'.

Drawing upon this, the accounts of experience and of self shared in social networking site statuses can be seen as involving 'small stories', and can be more usefully described as fragmented 'micro-narratives'. The 'micro-narrative' aspect refers to the fact that each status which refers to an experience, involves a decision to narrativise this into a 'storied' account of personal experience or emotion, involving some narrative standards- such as of tellability and limited emplotment- albeit in a condensed space. These 'micro-narratives' only implicitly are placed sequentially by the structure of the site, and in referring to specific experiences and emotions at specific times.

The 'fragmented' aspect encapsulates the ways in which individual micro-narratives, minimal in the information they convey in themselves, over time accumulate into a

wider fragmented ‘narrative’ of life experience, situating events within time. While the fragmented account given over time lacks causal emplotment, as we shall see, it was seen by interviewees as having the capacity to be judged by narrative standards and norms, and incorporate aspects of cultural narratives.

It is important, as Bamberg states, to consider the ways in which the ‘small stories’ of the everyday reference, link to and position themselves with respect to ‘big stories’. Not only in terms of how the everyday small stories build up to a larger life story weaved together from micro-narratives, (2004) but also in the sense of looking at how 'big story' cultural narratives are met with and referenced within the small space of the social networking site status. It is also relevant to note that the process of making a ‘big story’ out of small stories is not only a narrativising process by which individuals make sense of themselves and their lives, but also forms a part of how they evaluate and frame the stories told by others.

We have seen that site users were both aware and concerned about the possibility of others piecing together and evaluating their fragmented statuses, due to perceived inconsistencies and changes in priorities over time which could lead to mistaken interpretations, due to their lack of control over the 'story'. Statuses were not seen as intended to build a 'life story', with turning points and an emplotted progression from past to present, but as a series of individual 'in the moment' interactions and comments, yet individuals were aware that others might piece together and evaluate these fragments. However, they also engaged in this interpretation and narrativisation process themselves, piecing together the fragments of others' 'small stories' into a larger story they evaluated according to narrative standards and narrative norms and according to how closely they drew upon cultural narratives.

As the below sections will elaborate, the findings support that of Leonardi’s study of Facebook which similarly found that statuses, while lacking the full coherence of longer life narratives, are ‘pieced together’ and narrativised into larger narratives by other site users (2009:12). As Leonardi found “in order to complete the story, other Facebook users must fill in the gaps created by the narrative fragments in order to

create a theme for the fragments and make sense of the story” (2009:26). Recognisable narrative standards and norms emerged as part of the means by which site users judged the statuses of others and framed their own experiences.

### **Judging the experiences of others**

As the proceeding sections will show, interviewees extended the standards of tellability and coherence further when judging the accounts of experience given by other site users, critically evaluating them according to several, sometimes self-contradictory narrative norms of appropriateness, balance and authenticity, in addition to narrative standards of tellability, intelligibility and coherence. Interviewees showed some frustration with those whose fragmented narratives were too contextual and fragmented to convey anything they could make sense of, suggesting that as they piece together and evaluate statuses over time, they prefer for them to be intelligible and coherent to them, as well as 'worth telling' and appropriate. However, they criticised both those whose statuses were too mundane and not 'tellable' enough, and those who seemed to be attempting to construct an idealised narrative, viewing both behaviours as engaging in behaviour that was inauthentic and aligned with celebrity culture.

Mercedes expressed some frustration with those whose statuses she felt were not meaningful, coherent or worth telling, commenting:

“With some people, all I know is what they like for breakfast and that they think that's important. It's strange how a person can vomit so much information but in the end you don't learn much at all.”

Anne, a 23 year old from Ohio studying language in Finland, showed further concern for intelligibility and coherence in her distinction between 'vague' and 'proper' statuses, showing she preferred statuses she could easily interpret:

“Vague tends to be like, ‘Cannot stop smiling even if it's raining’. Doesn't really tell me what happened to Hanna that made her smile, or if it's just a random quote. . .so therefore, vague. I have to assume that something good happened. More proper in the sense of telling me what's going on would be

something more like ‘Went to Denny's last night, had a great time!’”

Vasily was dismissive of the potentials of social networking sites as “my impression that it was mostly complaining or things like, ‘going to the mall’”. Many behaviours singled out for criticism involved a disregard for tellability and appropriateness- the reporting of overly mundane events that “nobody would care about” or a tendency towards negative complaints about their experiences and feelings. As Bruner notes, “a narrative must also answer the question 'Why?' 'Why is this worth telling, what is interesting about it?' Not everything that happened is worth telling about, and it is not always clear why what one tells merits telling” (Bruner 2001:28).

Several interviewees criticised those who were perceived as inappropriately over disclosing information about their lives as acting as if they were someone more important than they were. Interviewees showed evidence of a critical ethic of disclosure as to how much was appropriate to disclose. Inga, a 20 year old student from Kazakhstan, took an especially critical view of those who disclosed too much of their lives, claiming they share-

“[What] they are doing from their private life to make it popular and to share for all people. I don’t really like it. It’s a kind of playing .. people trying to play as if they’re famous or something.”

Similarly, Margaret, a 30 year economist from Edinburgh, drew a parallel between social networking site disclosure and “celebrity professional magazines- the likes of hello and OK magazine.”

Mundane personal information about experiences, when stripped from the context of immediate conversation, was perceived by many as other-directed, and criticised for failing to interest the others it was directed towards. Searching for a similar context where people would be expected to be interested in mundane details of someone's life, comparisons with celebrities emerged. As Oulasvirta et al comment: “when it comes to utterly mundane doings, we can presume that the content is interesting only in cases of important people—for example, royalty, movie stars, or other celebrities” (Oulasvirta et al 2010:238). This comparison is reminiscent of Turner's (2006)

concept of the 'demotic turn', towards “the increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’ as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture” (2006: 153) using online media, which Turner views as potential vehicles for a kind of ‘celebrification’ of everyday experience. Turner sees this as reflective of a convergence of the 'ordinary person' and the celebrity- in which aspects of the celebrity’s personal life are subject to unprecedented focus, and the ordinary person becomes more involved in representing themselves in ways reminiscent of the celebrity (2006; Marshall 2010). These cultural trends encourage site users to expose mundane details of their lives and violate standards of tellability- but the reception they receive does not at all validate the idea of 'living like a celebrity'.

### **‘Watchers, not doers’- ambiguities of ‘genre’**

The critical approach many site users have towards others is, to a degree, the product of ambiguities about what ‘genre’ of social interaction or representation social networking sites belong to (Azariah 2010). There has been no prior equivalent to the social networking sites’ self-referential and egocentric but phatic, individualistic but connected aspects- no prior media which has encouraged everyday self-disclosure to an audience merged across online and offline contexts. Reflecting some of this ambiguity, in observational data, some site users used localised slang or even dialect and accent in their social networking site statuses, suggesting a perception that statuses should continue across offline-online boundaries in the form of everyday speech as opposed to according to the less colloquial conventions of written language.

Users of online media have been theorised by Azariah as adapting to online media using the conventions of “familiar but out of place genres” (2010:65). The adaptive process of drawing on previously known genres may actually cause problems due to mismatched expectations of genre between users. This seems to also frequently result in a mismatch in how users view their own role in site use in comparison to that of others.

Many site users in fact described themselves as “watchers not doers”, as interviewee Emily put it, stressing that these sites were supplementary to other interaction and that they were there more to ‘keep up’ with the doings of others than to post what they were doing and feeling themselves. The incidental updates they gave on their lives and experiences and the comments they made on others’ statuses as they did so, meant that there was a certain reciprocity of information sharing going on between users, even though sharing their own experiences was not the main reason they were there.

This could potentially be interpreted as a reflection of a distinction between participant 'users' and non-participant 'lurkers' identified in earlier research on other types of media (Nonnecke and Preece 1999). However, nearly all interviewees downplayed the importance of sharing their own experiences and giving information about their own lives, and these site users were not true 'lurkers', in that they updated their statuses often and described interacting with others- they simply considered this less of a priority than keeping up with others' doings. This suggests this is overall a typical aspect of site users' attitudes towards these sites.

As will be elaborated in the proceeding sections, users simultaneously downplayed the significance of their own statuses while perceiving others as presenting accounts specifically for others’ attention and approval. They acted here as evaluative consumers of others’ statuses while avoiding seeing themselves as content producers. This may inadvertently increase the behaviours singled out for criticism.

These tendencies cause Parks, in his study of MySpace, to go as far as to suggest that “users themselves are really seeking theater, or at least something much more akin to a mass medium. The behaviour of a large portion of participants more closely resembles that of passive viewers or audience members than that of active participants in a community” (2011:119). The results do not show a relationship between performance and audience as one-sided as the relationship between theatre goers and performers, but there was tension in interviewees’ attitudes as to whether or not the point was primarily to present material, accounts and the self ‘for others’



or 'for the self', and to what extent the audience should be considered (Marwick and Boyd 2010). They often acted as evaluative consumers of others' statuses while avoiding seeing themselves as content producers.

### **Cultural narratives and authenticity**

Both the 'demotic' turn' and the self-referential aspects of statuses encourage violation of standards of tellability, but site users did not validate the idea of 'acting like a celebrity', instead viewing it as highly inauthentic. Social networking site users were very conscious of the gap between the everyday reality of their friends and contacts' experiences, and the types of cultural narratives shown in a mass medium. While site users to some degree acted as 'consumers' in judging others by narrative standards and norms, the requirement that narratives remain 'authentic' caused them to criticise statuses which too closely resemble idealised cultural narratives of 'how to live life'.

Personal narratives are theorised as often containing an evaluative and frequently an ethical aspect- they involve to some degree an evaluation and a structuration of life experience according to broader cultural 'public' narratives of how life should be lived (Freeman and Brockmeier 2001; Somers 1994). Looking at the interplay between cultural narratives and the personal narratives shared in interaction gives insight into aspects of the links between self, social context and culture.

Labov states that the 'reportability' (tellability) of a narrative is "inversely correlated" with its "credibility" or authenticity (1997:9). Credibility also seems inversely correlated with the extent to which an account resembles a recognisable cultural narrative. Given that self-presentation is often described as being about presenting the best possible impression to others, (Boyd 2007; Goffman 1967; Leonardi 2008) this critical evaluative focus would seem to complicate strategic impression management intended to give an 'idealised' impression.

The particulars of the merged audience across online and offline boundaries, and

these media's self-referential, egocentric structure, would seem to exacerbate a tendency for a critical attitude towards the self-presentation of others. Some of this criticism was the result of the ways in which social networking sites allow for a comparison of online and offline presentation. Interviewees would state they 'knew' the 'real' lives of people they knew were not as they were portraying it, as Kevin, a 50 year old unemployed man from England put it:

“With people that you’ve known for a while you go, I know your profile’s a real exaggeration and that’s not what your life’s really like.”

As Leonardi states, “storytellers must also ensure that their front stage performance aligns with their off-stage performance (offline in this case) so that their truthfulness is not called into question” (2009:69).

Leonardi’s study identified social networking site users as using narratives to construct a positive idealised self as “a glorification of what one should or ought to be in terms of social acceptability”, but also identified a group of site users who presented a “negative idealised self”- purposefully positioning themselves as counter to social norms, by concentrating on negative aspects of their lives and making cynical, negative comments (2009:97). Both these positive and negative “idealised” uses of narratives identified by Leonardi were criticised by interviewees in the research. Interviewees also criticised those who fit Leonardi’s category of the “demanding self”- those who were ‘attention seeking’ and implicitly or explicitly searching for input and feedback from others (2009).

To avoid inauthenticity, *balance* was an important standard to meet. This was expressed in the strongest terms by Margaret. She claimed that Facebook users presented themselves and their lives with reference to wider idealised cultural narratives and norms, claiming that “everyone has a narrative now instead of a life”. She felt that the ability to be selective about what was revealed online enabled Facebook users to better give the appearance of living an idealised narrative. This lacked a realistic balance of the good and bad, and constituted an inauthentic “outward kind of show” that had a “storyline” and “character arcs” fitting people into

various pre-set roles. She felt that this actually had a negative effect on others, in encouraging them to feel dissatisfaction with their lives and giving them pressure to edit their experiences in a similar way, creating an idealised narrative norm on the site:

“I really dislike ... people who portray their lives, you know if they’re married with children for instance it’s endless baking cakes and family boating and stuff.. And I go.. I don’t imagine that you’re life’s really like that. Or if I know them I’ll go ‘your life’s not like you spend your whole time going like ‘I don’t know why I had children’ and you know ‘all I’m doing is washing’ and I think [it would be better] if people were a wee bit more truthful., because what happens is other people look at it and go..’ Like.. my life’s hellish and I’m in same situation’ or it’s not so picturesque as that so there’s this kind of pressure that they didn’t have before. With how we portray ourselves. So I try not to, I want to have a balanced profile so that people don’t go like.. ‘she’s living this dream’.. but giving you like .. ‘I’ve eaten cereal now for three nights in a row’ you know it’s not kind of like endless rounds of Nigella Lawson recipes.”

Here mundaneity and more negative disclosure serves as a means to counterbalance the more ‘tellable’ and idealised. Maintaining an authentic impression was framed in terms of ‘balance’ by some other interviewees. June’s comment that-

“authentic would be the good, the bad and everything in between. I think most people make themselves look as good as possible online without lying,”

-encapsulates both the prioritisation of balance as authentic and the belief that many miss out the negative aspects of their lives.

This concern for balance is similar to that found in Marwick and Boyd’s study of Twitter users, which found that “personal authenticity and audience expectations must be balanced” (2010:13). Their study concentrated on those who had attained the status of ‘micro-celebrity’, a position which necessitates an inherently unbalanced relationship between a post’s author and their many ‘followers’. Faced with this situation of attempting to manage an audience from various contexts and balance the desire for self-promotion with the desire to remain ‘authentic’ without over prioritising the mundane, Twitter ‘micro-celebrities’ grappled with how much to

structure their content to fit their audience (2010). While exacerbated by the requirements of maintaining status as a ‘micro-celebrity’, this struggle seems to reflect an intrinsic aspect of impression management on networked social media.

‘Balance’ and a persistent concern for authenticity emerged as the standard to give guidance as to appropriate levels of disclosure and audience orientation. Concern for tellability and coherence must be balanced with the demands of authenticity, and authenticity must be within the bounds of ‘appropriate disclosure’. For their personal narratives to be credible, social networking site users must avoid giving an impression of an imbalanced narrative that follows cultural narratives too closely. Too much mundanity draws criticism on the grounds of being inattentive to the standards of tellability, yet drawing too closely on narrative conventions and constructing a coherent, tellable narrative would seem potentially to draw criticisms of a lack of balance. Authenticity is here a difficult balancing act, especially given that *over*-thinking the audience’s reaction and orienting content to them was perceived as somewhat inauthentic in itself (Marwick and Boyd 2010).

This requirement of balance and a form of authenticity based on eschewing idealised cultural narratives can in itself be framed as a narrative norm. That is, it forms a set of sometimes contradictory guidelines as to how to produce a valid and ‘authentic’ narrative, regulating the ways in which accounts are written and displayed. It also forms a common, ideologically infused way of describing the processes of narrativisation and self-presentation, as social networking site users describe and apply these criteria to their own narratives and that of others.

As narrative norms, they are used in judging and evaluating the stories shown by others, but individuals also use these norms to frame and contrast their own behaviour with that of others and say something about themselves, their values and their priorities. Margaret's above account, for example, shows how stories about how others violate these norms are used to position the self in contrast with the practices of others, and to establish and affirm what is seen as a morally grounded alternative.

Personal narratives are often said to have a moral, evaluative component to them, and to be an expression of the individual's expression of cultural ideals, drawn from cultural narratives and discourses (Bruner 2001; Leonardi 2009). It is notable, though, that the common narrative norms and standards of site users expressed in interviews establish themselves as *counter* to what is 'normal', and ideal- as they claim themselves opposed to the process of attempting to too obviously draw upon cultural narratives and exemplify broader cultural norms. Indeed, concepts such as authenticity, appropriateness and tellability are invoked in way that frames them as *counter* to what is perceived as normal and common behaviour in others, yet they in actuality form common morally infused norms among social networking site users, and draw upon broader cultural conceptions of authenticity and individualism.

There is a strong undercurrent of an individualistic conception of the relationship between self and culture that holds that to too closely and obviously attempt to fit the self to a cultural ideal is inherently inauthentic. This focus upon authenticity and upon an individualistic idea of the self as ideally detached from the demands of others, will be elaborated on throughout the thesis. Social networking sites, with their focus upon self-promotion and self display, have been seen as encouraging the 'celebrification' and 'mediatisation' of everyday lives, and as encouraging self-branding- 'marketing' the self according to idealised images of what a person should be. Yet, as future chapters will show, they also seem to draw out a strong desire to counter and critique these kinds of processes in others- a tendency which is heightened by the ambiguities of speech genres these sites involve, as well as by the qualities of the merged audience.

While the space given by narratives of self and experience is limited in the case of social networking sites, other sites mentioned by interviewees- such as those that allowed for blogs or journals- tended to be considered more significant in their ability to contribute to reflexive self-development and emotional expression, and the reflexive narrativisation of experiences. They followed far more closely the kinds of causal emplotment and narrative norms considered characteristic of 'big story' autobiographical narratives. This was partly due to structural differences in the sites, as

these sites simply offered more space for sharing and developing narratives. However, these differences are also the product of differing site purposes, configurations of the audience, and levels of anonymity, as will be described in detail in subsequent chapters.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, the concept of narrative is useful in looking at the accounts of experience shared on networked social media, though it requires adaptation to encapsulate the socially oriented, fragmented nature of the social networking site status, which concentrates on documenting the present while building archives of the past. Conceiving of the accounts of experience given in site statuses as ‘fragmented micro narratives’ captures the discontinuous nature of each status while also encapsulating that these narratives are viewed and evaluated as fragments of a larger life narrative, and judged according to some narrative norms and standards.

The narratives shared on social networking sites, as opposed to the longer narratives possible on journals and blogs, are generally fragmented ‘small stories’, as opposed to the ‘big stories’ of ‘life-stories’ (Bamberg 2004). It is important to recognise the ways in which the ‘small stories’ at a micro-level can build up over time to become incorporated into the ‘bigger stories’ of life narratives, and this process is exemplified on the social networking site.

In sharing their experiences and narrativising their experiences into statuses, and engaging in interaction with others, site users create 'small story' fragmented micro narratives, the fragments of which may be narrativised and evaluated into larger life stories retrospectively by themselves and by others. Social networking site users reflected on the cumulative impressions they gave of themselves via the fragmented ‘small story’ micro narratives they shared on these sites, as well as judging the cumulative narratives of others by the standards of broader narratives and ‘big stories’.

The statuses of others were evaluated by narrative standards of tellability, coherence and intelligibility, and the narrative norms of appropriateness, balance and authenticity. Overall, accounts of experience were judged authentic where they avoided drawing upon recognisable cultural narratives and maintained a balance between positive and negative, mundane and significant disclosure, and between too much and too little consideration of the audience. Interviewees used these narrative norms not only to evaluate the cumulative 'big story' of the fragmented micro-narratives of others, but also to frame and position their own site use in contrast to what they saw as inauthentic and inappropriate practice.

The findings discussed here place the status as micro-narrative in an interesting position with regards to how aspects of these sites fit with and reflect broader theoretical conceptions of contemporary society as in a state of postmodern flux or 'late modern' reflexivity. The immediacy, discontinuity and fragmentation of the micro-narrative, which concentrates on the fleeting moment, aligns with postmodern conceptions of society as concentrating on the moment and avoiding in-depth reflexive summations and extensive engagement with narrative. Yet site users piece together the fragmented statuses of others, narrativising them into something coherent they can make sense of and evaluate using recognisable narrative standards and norms. Meanwhile, while site users' rejection of adherence to cultural narratives and their downplaying of reflexivity might be considered hallmarks of a postmodern approach to identity which rejects the idea of conforming to pre-existing cultural ideas, they also reject the individualistic promises of the 'demotic' turn, and strongly affirm the importance of authenticity. Overall there is an affirmation of Giddens' (1991) idea of authenticity and personal narrativisation as key aspects of how individuals meet with contemporary aspects of culture, yet authenticity also somewhat paradoxically brings with it a distaste for being consciously reflexive.

On a surface level the self-referential focus of social media would appear to encourage heightened reflexivity and provide good examples of the narrativisation of self described by theorists such as Giddens. However, due to this focus on authenticity, social networking site users downplayed the role of construction and choice and reflexivity in what they revealed and concealed about themselves and

their lives.

If these media encourage, then, a reflexive narrativisation of self and experience, the reflexivity encouraged by these sites is one which provokes a desire to reaffirm the 'natural' unconstructed nature of what is shared. The focus on authenticity shows the pervasiveness of individualistic notions of authenticity which place a primacy on the notion of a singular self and core identity which is 'outside' of social construction and broader cultural ideas, and not orientated towards the concerns of others.

The complicated position of these media with respect to theorised changes and conceptualisations of society will be further elaborated in this thesis by looking at the image and the narrative as competing and parallel aspects of social media that align with differing conceptions of trends in contemporary society. Looking at the complicated role of authenticity is key to understanding the ways in which individuals react to and conceptualise and meet with these theorised changes, as authenticity emerges as a response to both the image and the narrative as an aspect of the dialectical relationships between self and culture. As will be explored in further chapters, concerns about authenticity are in fact particularly heightened on social networking sites, due to ambiguities of genre, and impression management difficulties caused by the merging of audiences across contexts.

### **Narrative identity and networked social media**

In narrative identity theory, narrative is of course not only used to describe the stories people tell about themselves, but is theorised as the means by which identity is constructed (Holstein and Gubrium 2009; Somers 1994). Throughout this PhD, a concern is to investigate and theorise multiple aspects of identity and self-presentation. Evaluating the concept of narrative identity, it can be seen to address several persistent problems in the theorisation of identity and the links between the self and the social.

It goes beyond explaining action merely by basing it on a sense of categorical



belonging, as it conceives of identity as “processual and relational” embedded “within relationships and stories that shift over time and space” (Somers 1994:621). Narrative identity also runs counter to a tendency to view contemporary identity and sociality as ephemeral, fragmented and disconnected. As McNay states, “the narrative view of the self seems to bypass the antinomy of essentialism versus fragmentation by suggesting that the self has unity, but it is a dynamic unity which integrates permanence in time with its contrary, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability” (2000:7).

It is an important means of theorising the temporal aspects of identity in theorising how individuals draw together experiences of the past and use them in construction of the present self, thus providing a way of getting at the ‘sedimented’ aspects of identity (McNay 2000). Narratives, both within and outwith social media, have a performative and a retrospective, reflexive function, they can be outwards and inwards and indeed backwards facing, as personal narratives both seek to construct experience into an account for others and to make meaning of experiences for the self (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). As networked social media site users narrativise their experiences, they are also presenting themselves as located within these experiences and also ‘performing’ their identities through their recounting of experience (Leonardi 2009; Walker et al 2000).

However narrative identity is of course one of several competing ways of conceptualising identity and making sense of the relation between self and social structure. This was reflected within the differing framings and concepts used in describing self-presentation, identity and the self by interviewees themselves. As will be elaborated in subsequent chapters, interviewees themselves slipped between describing self-presentation and identity in terms of narrative and in terms of presenting an ‘image’. There is overlap between the two, as aspects of the cultural narratives referenced as drawn upon by others in self-presentation are also describable as involving idealised ‘images’ or ‘lifestyles’ with connections to particular identities.

For example, a personal narrative which resembles cultural narratives of what constitutes a happy family could also be said to involve the 'performance' of an identity as a parent, and could also involve drawing upon cultural imagery attached to parenthood and certain 'lifestyles' or 'styles' of parenting. The individual's relational place among the family- as a mother, or father or child, would also affect the imagery and narratives that could be drawn upon, presented and performed. In drawing on narratives or other aspects of culture, social actors draw on material which they are aware fit with or contradict their particular categorical identifications they are born with or come to adopt by choice or due to circumstance. As Holstein and Gubrium state "race, class and gender are deep reservoirs of self-construction resources compromising influential conditions for self-narration" and "standpoints" for positioning the self in narratives, but also within other cultural discourses, images and lifestyles (2009:105; Denzin 1991).

Narrative may be one means by which individuals make sense of themselves and the world, but it cannot encapsulate all of the fragmented, incoherent aspects of cultural experience- the discontinuous texts, discourses, and images which make up the cultural world and are difficult to frame within the grounded coherence of the narrative. Instead of viewing identity as solely produced through narrative, as in some conceptions of 'narrative' identity, it seems more productive to view an interplay between personal and cultural narratives as one aspect of the dialectic between self, identity and culture. Narratives can do a useful job of bridging some theoretical gaps between structure and agency, identity and social action, in theorising how social actors come to make sense of their experiences to themselves in personal narratives as well as present accounts of them to others. Additionally, the chapter shows how cultural narratives and narrative norms and standards can shape the ways personal accounts of experience and identity are structured, framed and interpreted. Further development of a theorisation of identity which will take into account these aspects as well as the more fragmented and visual aspects of dialectics between self and culture will be made throughout the chapters of this PhD.

## Chapter 4: Taste and the Image

In the decades since the Internet's inception, there has been a shift from the textual to the visual online, and to study networked social media necessitates examining multiple dimensions of 'image'. What made early textual online media theorised spaces for identity play was partly their provision of a textual, anonymised place where identities and bodies were literally "written into being" (Súnden 2003; Turkle 1995). In contrast, networked social media such as social networking sites have been seen as instrumental in extending the 'ubiquity' of the image deep into everyday existence (Hand 2012). As individuals document and share images of their lives on the pages of networked social media, photography has been seen as transformed from a tool for "memory capturing" into a tool for self-presentation and communication (Van Dijk 2008:7; Murray 2008). Photographs bring back the body to online interaction in representing the physical self, reducing anonymity and increasing identifiability, and this has been seen as contributing to the 'sexualisation' of networked social media (Manago et al 2008; Siibak 2009).

Meanwhile, these media's concentration on the display of consumer tastes makes them 'image saturated' in another sense, as many networked social media encourage their users to engage in "self-branding" and to "describe themselves like products" (Marwick 2005, 2011; Rosen 2004, quoted in Bugeja 2006:para 14). Self-branding is a form of self-presentation which involves crafting a desirable, marketable 'image' of the self, "through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream cultural industries" (Hearn 2008:194). Social networking sites encourage self-branding practices, including by providing more space in profiles for the display and cataloguing of consumer tastes than for most other aspects of self description, encouraging self-presentation via 'taste performances' (Liu 2007; Liu et al 2008). Schwarz, Marwick and others have also suggested these sites encourage the presentation of self in photographs in ways which draw heavily upon advertising imagery, and organise photographs and social contacts according to the 'logic of the catalogue' (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2011;

Schwarz 2010). Interviewees' use of the metaphor of presenting or projecting images to describe self-presentation, briefly described in the previous chapter, reflects the predominance of the 'image' as a concept on these sites, as well as in broader culture.

Self-branding is 'about image'- involving the promotion of self as brand via multiple dimensions of image, in ways which link to theorisations of the predominance of 'image' in a 'neo-liberal' visual culture seen as increasingly 'mediatised' and saturated with 'media logic' and advertising and celebrity-like forms of self representation (Hearn 2008; Marshall 2010; Marwick 2009, 2010; Schwarz 2010, Turner 2006).

These tendencies place networked social media in an interesting position with respect to theorised transformations in contemporary society. Society has been theorised as increasingly mediated and saturated and represented and interpreted in terms of 'image' in a culture which is increasingly a "visual culture" as well as a "commodity culture" (Chaney 2004; Hand 2012; Sandywell 2011; Schroeder 2002). There is a 'visual turn' parallel to the 'narrative turn' discussed in the previous chapter, and in some theorisations, the narrative is seen as increasingly replaced by the image- "shifting gradually from the linearity of prose to a profusion of pictorial imagery linked by connotative associations rather than their denoted content" (Chaney 2004:44; Hand 2012; Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

The predominance of 'image' is seen as part of the detraditionalising process in which identity becomes detached from the strictures of predefined roles and becomes increasingly a matter of choice amongst a fleeting 'carnival of signs' (Baudrillard 1994; Chaney 2004; Sweetman 2004). This choice is mediated and displayed through the use of cultural signs, as "people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they process and display" (Warde 1995:878; Baudrillard 1994; Bauman 2000; Hand 2012). While for some, the image has replaced the narrative, casting us "adrift in a sea of images" and diffuse signification (Baudrillard 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 2000) for others, such as Giddens, it is the destabilisation and profusion of cultural meaning that increases the

importance of narrativising processes as a way of finding coherence through the profusion of choices (Giddens 1991; Sweetman 2004; Muggleton 2000). Self-branding practices have been seen to involve a monetisation and commodification of the 'reflexive project of the self' for self gain- encouraging a form of self-promotional 'self-improvement' which is reflexive only in the sense of involving a purposeful attempt to achieve a particular 'image' for personal gain in terms of social capital or profit (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2005, 2011) .

While consumer taste itself is an important potential source of meaning and identification in this media landscape, the increasingly diffuse and image mediated profusion of signification has in itself also been seen as eroding the social meanings of taste and ushering in a 'post-subcultural' era where taste is no longer a matter of collective identification, but treated as a matter of individual expression (Bennett 1990; Chaney 2004; Muggleton 1997, 2000; Polhemus 1996).

Networked social media are interesting media through which to examine these debates, in exemplifying narrativising tendencies as well as multiple dimensions of the image, in focusing on the presentation of self via photography and encouraging self-definition via consumer tastes. The aim of this chapter is to deal with four differing aspects of the image: the visual image, the image as a metaphor for aspects of self-presentation, the 'image' as an aspect of culture, related to styles and lifestyles, and image as presented and displayed through the use of consumer tastes.

This spans several of the most relevant ways in which multiple dimensions of the 'image' are part of self-presentation and its evaluation on networked social media, and are relevant to debates about theorised changes towards an 'image saturated' and commodified culture which extends the 'image' and consumer tastes and self-branding practices into everyday self-presentation and interaction. Image, as a metaphor for self-presentation, as will be explored, serves as a locus of tensions expressed by site users surrounding self-presentation, self-branding, authenticity, and links between self and culture. Its use also reflects a backlash against the 'demotic turn' and ambivalence towards the predominance of 'image' in a visually saturated

culture.

Firstly, the chapter will examine attitudes towards the use of photography as a means of self-presentation on merged audience networked social media. In doing so, it will also look at the implications of the use of image as a means of describing both the act of self-presentation in itself and the process of drawing upon and representing 'images' from culture. Based upon this, it will go on to develop a theorisation of self-presentation, informed by semiotics and the work of Goffman and Jenkins. This theorisation will view an aspect of the dialectics between the self and the social as involving a dialectical relationship between aspects of 'personal image' in self-presentation, and 'cultural images'. Cultural images are not confined to actual visual images, but work in image-like ways to attach diverse meanings to the signs used in self-presentation.

Aspects of the personal image and its relationship with cultural images and its links with consumer culture will be explored with reference to the display of tastes. The ways in which tastes convey meaning in self-presentation provide an example of the interactions between personal and cultural image as well as an example of how the 'image' is met with and resisted and critiqued by a narrative norm of 'authenticity'. It will be argued that the 'cultural image' is useful in explaining the partial fragmentation of the social meaning of taste and in accounting for the partly destabilised but enduring ways in which social categories such as gender are maintained and reproduced.

Since it is the merged audience social networking site which introduces photographs as an intrinsic aspect of self-presentation and communication, in discussing photography, this chapter will focus in particular on merged audience social networking sites. In discussing taste, although merged audience and pseudonymous media foreground the display of taste in different ways, the results for differing types of sites were similar enough that they will be discussed together.

### **Photography on the social networking site**

This section will deal with the visual image and the use of photographs in self-presentation, while also considering the metaphor of 'image' as used as a term both for self-presentation and the act of drawing upon 'cultural images'. As we shall see, interviewees' attitudes towards visual self-presentation in many senses mirrored their attitudes towards narratives. They stressed the 'natural' unconstructed aspects of their own 'authentic' self-presentation, valorising 'balance' and 'appropriateness' and contrasting this with the 'inauthentic' practices of others.

### **Profile photographs, choice and artifice**

The profile photograph is one of the most important aspects of self-presentation on social networking sites, serving as the mediated 'face' of the user (Boyd 2008). Interviewees reported changing their profile photographs at least every month, making it a dynamic rather than static representation.

Social networking sites have been seen as transforming the uses of photography in part due to their renewed focus upon photography as a means of self-presentation that is often framed as both self-referential and self-promotional- presenting an idealised 'image' of the self (Schiano et al 2002; Sessions 2009; Van Dijk 2008). Site users seemed keenly aware of discourses that align self-photography with self-promotion, and drew upon them when evaluating and judging others' photographs, while being careful to distance themselves from these practices. They had a near uniform insistence that they chose their profile photographs casually, warding off any idea they consciously aimed to 'look good' and impress others, and claiming instead that they wished to provide an image that was active, balanced and accurate. This reflects a desire to position themselves as opposed to self-promotional practices and the implied 'narcissism' and self-promotion of the profile photo 'selfie'.

There were three broad trends in how interviewees described their choice of profile photograph. The largest group of interviewees were concerned with maintaining a balance between looking authentically 'themselves' and avoiding looking either bad

or as if they were ‘posing’ as something they were not.

Emma, a 22 year old from Florida, made a comment exemplifying this approach:

“I don't put up posed photos of me looking like I'm trying to look really awesome or something. Because that's not me... But mostly on top of looking decent and not out of the norm I choose pictures that make me happy and I feel show me.”

Jill stressed the importance of ‘balance’, claiming the audience reaction was what motivated her to be careful not to seem to be ‘posing’:

“You can't have ones where you look too bowfin' but you can't have ones where you look too good either, because if there's ones where you look like you're just basically posing, then I'll get ripped to shreds.”

Several people mentioned choosing photos that were ‘not bad’ rather than good. Ben commented- “I just picked pictures of me that I thought didn't look too dreadful”, and Ian claimed that you want in your profile photo “something that's a decent reflection of you, that makes you look alright as well- not something that makes you look disgusting.” Despite the particular difficulties women face when it comes to navigating self representation in photographs (Sessions 2009), this attitude was common across all genders and age groups.

A second, smaller group of interviewees described wanting to show themselves doing something active, which would convey something about their interests or personality. Inga commented:

“I don't like just [to] have the face.. because I'm an ecologist we have expeditions somewhere in the countryside or the sea. maybe from this photo, maybe people can really understand what kind of a person I am.”

Although some interviewees viewed men as more likely to depict themselves 'doing something', female interviewees were just as likely to stress the importance of showing their own interests. Overall, as with narrative, most interviewees stressed the unconstructed, natural nature of the images they showed, downplaying the role of choice. Notably, the photographer and the act of the photograph being taken often



receded out of discussion, as if photographs were selected from a naturally occurring archive of options. 25 year old American interviewee John's statement that "I had it lying around" exemplifies the claims interviews often made about their choice being casual. Only one interviewee mentioned specifically taking a photograph for their profile.

This is a reflection partly of interviewees' persistent framing of 'authentic' self-presentation in terms of the concealment and revelation of glimpses of an authentic whole rather than as a conscious attempt to make a particular impression. Thus, interviewees tried to avoid giving the impression they were consciously and carefully choosing an image for how it would look to others. However, this may also be a reflection of the ways in which the tagging process pools together photographs of people from several different photographers. Despite the ways in which this takes control over presented images away from the user, and the difficulties of etiquette tagging and untagging can present, it seems the ability to untag pictures can in some cases quieten concerns about a lack of control. As Tomas, a German Graduate student commented, "this option to untag myself makes it ok for me".

### **Maintaining control over 'image'**

A more ambiguous attitude to the lack of control merged audience sites offer over photographs was reflected in the concerns interviewees expressed about potential longevity of 'inappropriate' photographs of themselves. As Jahi put it- "once it is online, it is there forever", and anything inappropriate was seen being able to do damage to a person's 'image' beyond that of any textual over disclosure, due to its 'persistence' (Boyd 2008). As Van Dijk comments, the "distributed presence" of the photograph on networked social media sites, serves to "lessen our grip on our images' future repurposing and reframing" (2008:7).

One group of interviewees, all female, used pseudonyms and avatars rather than photographs and real names to represent themselves. They wished to retain privacy and maintain control over images of themselves, avoid unwanted attention and

stalking. Due to general concerns about the safety of the Internet, for example, Vasily felt “I don’t want photographs of me on the Internet” and Sarah, a 41 year old American, joked that she’d used privacy settings to stay in a “self created convent”:

“I’m not searchable to the general public. I have a profile pic that is a statue’s face, since you can’t mark that as private/friends only.”

One American interviewee had a Muslim husband from Jordan. Because showing family life to people outside the family was inappropriate in his culture, she had blocked all the men on her friends list from seeing her photograph. This is a creative example of adapting technology to avoid transgressing cultural norms of privacy.

That identifiability and the display of photographs of the self make women feel more vulnerable to harassment, inappropriate attention, stalking or negative judgement is one reason why merged audience sites’ bringing back of bodily cues to online interaction has consequences for gender online (Boyd 2006; Sessions 2009). The measures some women take to maintain relative anonymity, however, show that limited control over these aspects can be regained, depending on technical knowledge of site controls.

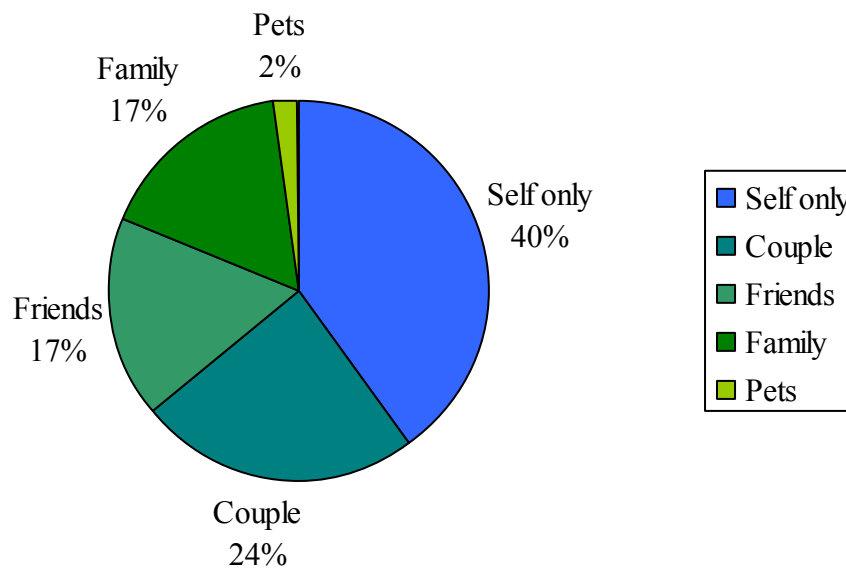
### **The social self- photographs in observation**

Observational data partly paralleled and partly contrasted with interviewee data. It was immediately clear from observational data that social networking site users tend to depict an image of themselves enmeshed in social relationships with others. Figure 2, below, summarises who people generally showed in their profile photographs alongside themselves, showing that overall 60% of profile photographs showed the person in the company of others- most commonly friends, family, or as part of a couple, though occasionally with pets. Though not marked on the pie chart, amidst those who showed themselves as a couple, or in a group with family, wedding photographs were also used by 5% of people. Figure 3 summarises what profile photographs typically showed people doing, showing that while a significant proportion (38%) were merely posing for the photo outside of any recognisable

setting, many photographs contextualised the individual as doing something, or posed them in a specific location. Many showed themselves partying or on holiday, while a somewhat smaller percentage used their profile photographs to show themselves engaging in hobby activities like hiking, or skiing, and others showed themselves in ways which foregrounded their tastes - for example in films or football teams. Figure 4 shows some example photographs, used with permission, illustrative of some of the range of types of photographs commonly used as profile photographs.

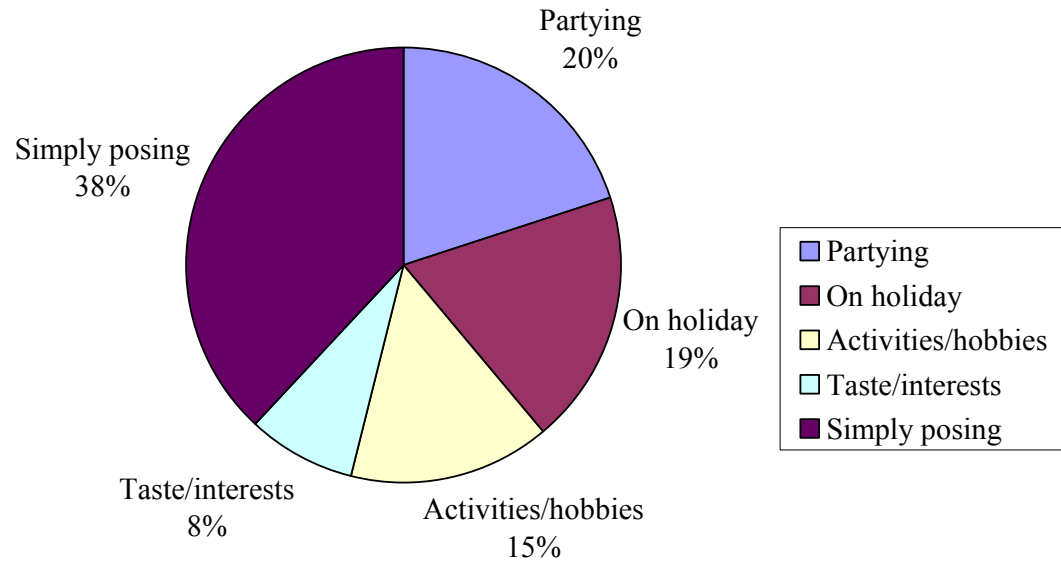
**Figure 2: Profile photo content chart**

**Figure 2: Profile photo content chart**

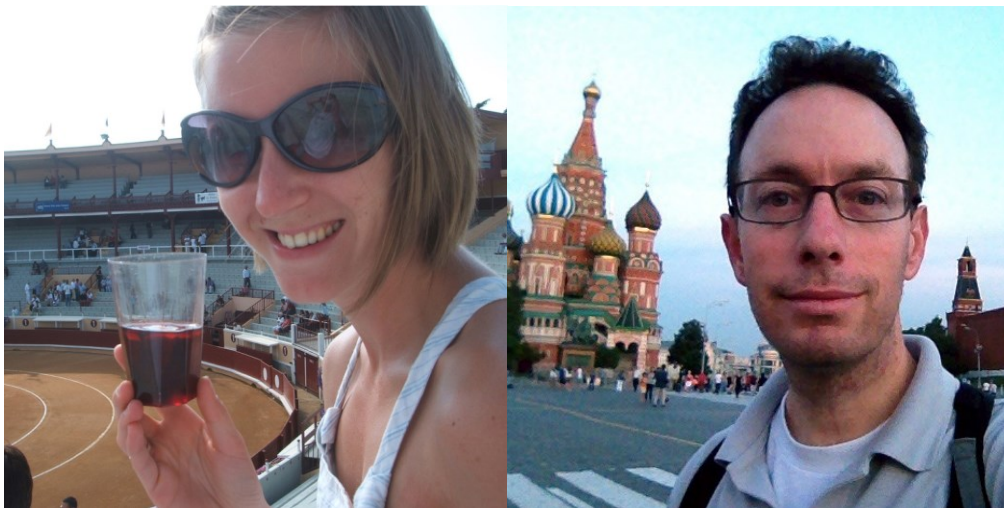


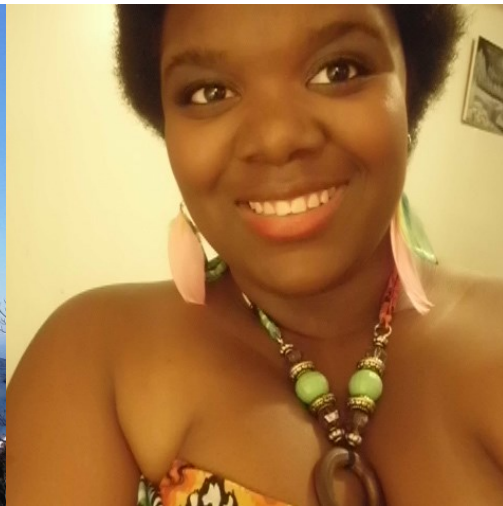
**Figure 3: Profile photo activities chart**

**Figure 3: Profile photo activities chart**



**Figure 4: Examples of typical types of profile photographs**







**Sources:** (Amended from Aston 2007; Baker 2014; Brew 2011; Chalmers 2007; 'CodeCuppyCakes' 2011; Coté 2002; Eden 2014; Lana 2006; Mercado 2014; McMahon 2008; Mondestin 2014; Morgan 2011; Odling 2013; Tarasenko 2005).

There was a conventional character to the photographs chosen for profile

photographs- that is, the same categories of photo tended to use similar poses, settings, expressions, and compositions, suggesting they were drawing upon collective images and ideas about how to represent themselves and their social relationships. There was a common tendency, especially among younger people, to depict what one interviewee called “your sparkling party self”- with 20% of the 100 Facebook profiles sampled showing people involved in parties, clubbing and other social events, often posing with friends with drinks in hand. This self representation has the dual function of providing an image of the self enmeshed in social relationships with others, and foregrounding a ‘front stage’ image of the self as fun loving, sociable and often more glamorously attired than in everyday situations (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2011). However, some photographs, in concentrating upon drinking, or showing more playful and joking poses, did not always represent a straightforwardly idealised self-presentation, connoting instead a celebratory hedonism and a down to earth lack of care for pretence. Holiday photographs were also common and generally showed the individual, often as part of a couple or friend or family group, smiling in summer clothes and sunglasses in sunny weather, with scenic locations visible in the background, often including signs of the 'exotic', like tropical drinks and palm trees. These photos as profile photographs both serve as a reminder of good times for the individual and their family and friends, fit common conventions of what is 'photograph worthy', and also associate positive, affluent, culturally desirable images with the self. Overall as well as stressing social connections with others, these photos aim to show the individual at their 'best', having fun in locations and circumstances generally associated with ideas of a 'good time'.

There is some suggestion here that users are drawing upon cultural images from advertising and broader culture to present culturally desirable images of themselves, aligning with critiques of site users as presenting themselves in idealised poses and settings reminiscent of the 'catalogue' (Schwarz 2010; Sessions 2009). However, the conventions evident in framing and posing overlap with the codes and imagery of conventional social photography. The majority of profile photographs fit within the criteria of 'traditional' social or domestic photography, in concentrating on special

events, holidays, social occasions, and marking and showing social relationships with friends, partners and family.

Thus, photographs of heterosexual couples and family photographs featuring children were very popular, particularly among older people, both comprising 17% each of profile photographs. With age, the tendency for the self to recede out of the picture in favour of children increased, reflecting an increasing tendency to define and project an impression of the self as part of a broader set of familial social relations. Men and women were equally likely to depict themselves alone, with friends or as part of a couple, but women were more likely to foreground their family- comprising 71% of those who featured their family in profile photographs. 78% of those who showed themselves involved in tastes, interests and activities were men, suggesting a greater tendency for men to foreground these aspects of their lives. This likely reflects that women are still encouraged and expected to invest themselves and their identities more in parenthood than men, as well as possibly reflecting that women who are parents are less likely than men to have leisure time for hobbies and interests (Shaw 2008).

A major aim of the profile photograph is thus not merely to show who a person is, and not only, as Siibak says, “to emphasize the things and qualities that were important for them” but also to show and commemorate their ties to the people who are important to them (2009:3; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2011).

Notably, it is the styles of photography most associated with young people, including self taken photographs and sexualised poses, which have the strongest associations with 'narcissistic' and over idealised photography practices on these sites (Sessions 2009; Van Dijk 2008), and these represent the greatest departure from 'conventional' social photography, in focusing solely on the self.

However, while self taken photographs and sexualised photographs were more common among those under 25, such photographs were overall uncommon, and only 10% of photographs used sexualised poses and attire. Observational data supported



interviewees' reports that they chose profile photographs from an existing selection of photographs, as only 23% percent of profile photographs were apparently taken solely for the sake of being a profile photograph.

Interestingly, in contrast to other studies (Manago et al 2008; Papacharissi and Mandelson 2010; Siibak 2009; Van Cleemput 2008), which found a "pervasiveness of sexualised female self-presentation" (Manago et al 2008:455) it was in fact slightly more common for men to pose or present themselves in a gendered or sexualised manner- usually shirtless and posing in the mirror. Given that other studies have found that men tend to be judged harshly for trying to show an image- even one stylised to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity- of the self as attractive and 'to be looked at' (Manago et al 2008; Siibak 2009), it is noteworthy that this social practice was slightly more common in men than with women.

### **Technologies of self and technologies of affect**

There is a tendency for young people, especially young women, to be subject to criticism for 'narcissism' and 'image consciousness' in popular accounts of social media (Marwick 2011; Sessions 2009). An example of this was a recent American Time magazine cover which symbolised the 'me me me generation' by depicting a teenage girl taking a photograph of herself to share online (Time 2013).

Literature on digital photography and social media has also tended to focus heavily on young people (Boyd 2007; Herring 2006). It has been claimed that photography use has been transformed across generations as 'digital natives' grow up using photography as a "tool for an individual's identity formation and communication" in contrast to traditional uses of social photography as a means of commemoration and the "the remembrance of family life" (Harrison 2002; Murray 2008; Van Dijk 2008:1).

Several studies have found that these sites exert pressure on young women to manage a difficult set of expectations, in encouraging a self-presentation that emphasises a

sexualised image of femininity while also presenting site users with an environment where this may result in them “being labelled as promiscuous” and shamed and criticised for their behaviour (Manago et al 2008:254).

That other studies have found higher percentages of self taken photographs, and a stronger tendency for poses and visual self-presentation to be highly gendered and sexualised than in this study reflects differences in practices across age. It may also reflect differences of audience between sites under study. Most of the studies mentioned focused upon young people interacting with each other in their peer networks as opposed to in more merged contexts where parents and others may exert additional pressure on young women to avoid a sexualised self-presentation. Women face especial difficulties in managing their self-presentation with respects to the portrayal of their bodies as they “negotiate discrepant cultural messages that communicate their value as sexual objects while at the same time punish those who embrace sexual behaviour with the label of ‘slut’” (Manago et al 2008:455). A merged audience of peers and family members who may make public negative judgement may inhibit sexualised self-presentation more than encourage it.

The results thus to some degree support the notion of generational difference in photography use. The research also supports the findings in other studies that the older generation “generally adheres to the primacy of photography as a memory tool, particularly in the construction of family life, whereas teenagers and young adults use camera-like tools for conversation and peer-group building” (Van Dijk 2008:5; Schiano et al 2002). However, this evidence for a generational change in self representation and photography use is overlapped by differences in social contexts and in local social norms, priorities and values which occur over a person’s life course.

Paparcharissi and Mendelson’s study of photography sharing among American college students described students’ photography as giving a collective, conventional account of what college life consists of which draws on and reaffirms cultural discourses, images and narratives of the common ‘college experience’. They state

“the same stories are told and retold in these photographs. These images are highly conventional, both in terms of their subject matter and their aesthetics. These images record the social rituals of college life” (2010:267).

That these photographs can be seen as both drawing on and contributing to shared, conventional means of representing aspects of life important at a particular stage in life is an important point with relevance to the results shown here. The perceived generational divide in the uses of photography is crosscut by changes in what kinds of experiences and relationships and ways of representing the self tend to be important and valued in different social milieus over time. Young individuals have more focus on friends and parties, but this may often give way to self-representation as part of a couple where relationships are involved, and parents in their 20s show the same focus upon familial ties and milestones in their children’s lives as older parents.

Profile photographs may draw upon and perpetuate shared repertoires, codes and images of how to represent what is socially desirable and valued in a person's social milieu, drawing upon idealised cultural imagery as they do so, but they are not wholly self focused, aiming to represent social relationships and commemorate events and friendships.

There is a continuity here as well as discontinuity with traditional social photography with regards to what counts as ‘photograph-worthy’, and site users make use of traditional photographic conventions to show closeness, affect, and sociality. As Sarvas and Frohlich’s work on digital photographs states, “looking at people’s photographs today, we can identify the same values and social functions that have been dominant throughout the history of photography: social bonding and communication, demonstration of cultural and group membership and identity, and preservation and retention of memories” (2011:147).

While profile photographs are often considered quintessentially narcissistic and self focused, aimed at presenting the ‘best possible image’, these photographs do more than just represent the self, in showcasing the group aspects of identity. These sites

are not simply potential 'technologies of the self'- that is, as Van Doorn, playing upon Foucault's terminology, puts it- primarily concerned with self representation and personal identity development and with showing the self in a positive, sociable light. They are also what Van Doorn calls 'technologies of 'affect' which “reinforce and demarcate social ties” and make and mark ‘mediated memories’ (Van Doorn 2011:539; Van Dijk 2008).

This in itself seems an obvious point to make about a site focused upon representing the individual self within a 'social network', yet these dual personal and interpersonal, self-referential and other-orientated aspects are, as we have seen also in the previous chapter, a source of much tension surrounding the use of these sites. Tension occurs, both in terms of the need for control over image that can emerge from the persistence of the distributed image among a large audience, but also in terms of a tension between the use of these sites as 'technologies of self' and 'technologies of affect'.

### **It's 'all about image'- critiquing the 'image conscious'**

While they described their own use of photographs as authentic, natural and as 'technologies of affect' aimed at social connection with others, site users had a tendency to criticise others as using these sites as 'technologies of self' and indeed for self-promotion and self-branding-like practices, inauthentically using photographs to present a particular 'image' for validation and attention.

Despite differences in observational data in what types of photography and imagery were common across age groups, which might have been expected to influence what types of photography seemed over-idealised to differing age groups of interviewees, both younger and older interviewees, male and female, had a similarly critical perspective. They tended to single out for criticism the kind of sociable 'partying' self representation common in observational data, criticising it as a transparent attempt to try and present a desirable image more 'fun' and 'cool' than the reality.

Jahi commented:

“The profiles of people in their 30's or 40's look very similar to the ones that teenagers have. There is always those happy pictures, at parties, dressed up, etc.”

Interviewees tended to perceive others' social photographs as images presented for the audience's approval and validation. Vasily criticised:

“People who try to do sexy face/pose in every photo like they're trying to beat into your head that they're awesome.”

Emma described her image conscious acquaintances as-

“People who put up huge group shots instead of out doing something crazy, just so people think that they're interesting people.”

Some interviewees described feeling like a kind of captive audience expected to look at other people's mundane and repetitive photographs. For example, Vasily characterised others' attitude as-

"I took all these with no particular intent for them to be artistic or interesting, with no thought about composition, but I need to share them so LOOOOOK, YOU'RE MY FRIENDS, YOU'RE OBLIGATED TO PAY ATTENTION!"

As with narratives, content was sometimes described as 'attention seeking'. Lily did not consider the 'attention seeking' quality "necessarily bad" but allied it with a certain "narcissism".

Some interviewees also described others as intentionally trying to edit their photographs to conceal anything unattractive and to present the most flattering possible image. Margaret laughingly commented:

“It's true everyone is far more attractive online...always their best photos... They've maybe taken like 20 photos just to get a flattering photo if they took it themselves.”

A few described others' photographs in a general sense as being aimed at simply

“looking good”. Oliver, a 23 year old petrol station worker, described those he knew as being-

“concerned with whether the photo looks good and whether it looks like the person (which seems somewhat tied to whether the photo looks good).”

Some interviewees linked this specifically to a desire to try and use these sites to find a partner, as in Jahi’s comments that women are-

“showing how pretty they are, it is almost like dating sites in some cases.”

Outright deception was considered a possibility by Kevin, who claimed that others sometimes used younger photos or even “their best friend’s photos as well. Don’t look anything like them.”

The treatment of the photograph as a ‘true’ document breaks down here to some extent, as the possibility for an unbalanced or deceptive selection of imagery is raised to the extent that an entire event in itself can be seen as having been photographed for the sake of how it would look to others.

That several interviewees were judgemental of those who showed images of themselves ‘out partying’ is to some degree surprising given that they are generally considered a ‘legitimate’ cause for social photography. Images depicting people as part of a happy couple or family or on holiday in exotic locations were not singled out in this way, despite also giving a socially desirable image of the person. The relative newness of partying and clubbing as a legitimate cause for social photography, and the cultural discourses that frame this type of photography as particularly image conscious and self-promotional and potentially inappropriate, seem to single this photography out as less authentic and less respectable. Due to the tagging process it may not even be on purpose that users’ galleries are dominated by photographs of social events. Restoring a ‘balance’ here would also seem to result in photographs that would be criticised for mundanity or inappropriateness. Indeed, those who photographed themselves in less than idealised circumstances were considered to be engaging in a particularly image-damaging kind of visual over

disclosure. For example, Jill questioned whether or not people were considering the consequences:

“What the hell, are you aware that you’ve put that into the public domain and you’re representing yourself and that’s for anybody’s consumption? Like falling over pissed and like, being sick and like.. there’s limits.”

### **For other’s sake – social photography sharing**

In contrast to how they described others’ motivations for showing social photographs, in discussing their own sharing of social photographs, it was notable that interviewees stressed the primarily social, communicative purpose of sharing, framing them as shown ‘for others’ sake’. It was more commonly framed this way by younger people, supporting claims that 'digital natives' are more likely to use photography as an act of communicative sharing (Harrison 2002; Murray 2008; Schiano et al 2002; Van Dijk 2008).

Amanda, a 22 year old unemployed animator from Australia, commented that she shared photos “particularly if it involved mates” and Ben shared images if-

“I thought they might be of interest... maybe if people wanted to know what I'd been up to, or else if they were there when the photos were taken and would probably like to see them.”

Pooling together group photographs involves the creation of ‘mediated memories’, attaching meaning and grounding images in a broader narrative account of shared experience (Papacharissi and Mandelson 2011; Van Dijk 2008; Van Doorn 2010).

Since site users felt differently about photography of events they themselves attended, it would seem that exclusion from the social photographs being shared is part of what encourages judgement of others’ photographs as attention seeking and aimed at looking good, rather than as part of a more equal sided process of social showing.

## **Personal Image**

If these sites encourage 'marketing the self', and engaging in self-branding, monetising and commodifying social networks for the sake of self-promotion, they also seemingly encourage a strong backlash against these practices, and against the demotic turn, in which 'image' is a term loaded with concerns about 'inauthenticity'. There are some ambivalences and contradictions here- site users are critical of those who 'market' themselves and present cultural ideals and images as if they have a consumer audience in mind, yet there is a partial, if critical, acceptance of acting to some degree as a 'consumer' of others' profile content. The term 'image' itself, as used to describe self-presentation, comes loaded with a suggestion that something less real and more superficial is being used to promote and obscure something 'real'. Self-presentation as about 'image' links thematically to self-presentation as self-branding, and the idea of both self as 'image' and as 'product' to be 'marketed' is seen as inauthentic.

The general tendency shown here to describe others as inauthentically' presenting idealised images of themselves, reflects the persistent tendency for the 'authentic self' to be defined by site users as natural and pre-social. These conceptions of authenticity and the self are partly the product of the potentials for cross-contextual comparison given by merged audience sites, as well as 'ambiguities of genre'. These aspects lead both to a greater tendency to judge material shared by others by the standards of cultural material, and a tendency to perceive a gulf between the idealistic glamour of cultural narratives and images and the perceived mundanity of their friends' lives. Perceived inauthenticity in others leads merged audience site users to affirm their own personal authenticity by contrasting their 'authentic' site use with the inauthentic practices of others, and in doing so, they downplay the role of conscious choice in their self-presentation. All of these aspects of authenticity will be explored in more detail in the chapter on authenticity.

The concept of 'image' stands at the juncture of many competing ideas about contemporary society, as well as being key to debates about these sites as



encouraging self-branding and the extension of 'media logics' and 'celebrification'. Image and authenticity are often treated by site users as antonyms, yet there is a complexity to the loaded implications of the term that warrants further exploration and theoretical examination and makes it useful to expand it to cover self-presentation. This section will map out the different aspects of site users' uses of 'image' into a theorisation of 'image' as an aspect of the dialectics between self-presentation, identity and culture. This allows also for a theorisation of aspects of how 'authenticity' works as a regulatory factor.

What can we say about what social networking site users mean when they speak of others as 'projecting an image?' Firstly- they are claiming that others are consciously attempting to portray a particular 'desired' image. Secondly, they imply that they are being invited to in some way 'validate' this 'image' by giving it attention. Thirdly, there is an implication that this 'image' has linkages with culture- that is, desired images are drawn from broader culture, connected with styles and lifestyles which are considered culturally desirable and 'cool'. Fourthly, they imply the process of drawing upon cultural images is somewhat superficial and inauthentic, involving putting a gloss over the 'reality' of a person's life and identity. Lastly, they suggest there is a 'reputational' aspect to image- that is, something can be 'good for' or 'bad for' someone's 'image'. These ideas are all relevant to discussion of self-branding practices, in which culturally desirable images and narratives are drawn together to present an image of the self for validation and attention from others.

Expanding upon the implicit uses of 'image' in this chapter, drawing on semiotics and the theories of Goffman and Jenkins, the multiple implicit meanings of image can be seen as involving a relationship between self image, desired image and public image.

**Self image-** refers to a person's self conception (Jenkins 2008). As I use it, this will encapsulate multiple identifications- for example gender or nationality, and is informed by 'personal narratives'. Though this term refers to self conceptions, site users frequently make judgements about the 'self images' of others- in claiming an

intentional mismatch between who a person ‘really’ is and how they present themselves.

**Public image-** adapting from but modifying Jenkins’ overall model, refers to what is shown to others in self-presentation. Drawing on semiotic language it refers to the cumulative ‘signs’ shown in self-presentation in a particular context to a particular audience. As I define it, it has analogous attributes to Goffman’s notions of ‘personal front’ in encapsulating aspects of appearance, dress and adornment and manner (Goffman 1967). Following Jenkins, public image has an internal aspect and an external aspect- “individuals present an image of themselves- of self- for acceptance by others. In my terms this is the internal moment of the dialectic of identification with respect to public image. The external moment is the reception of that presentation by others: they can accept it or not” (Jenkins 2008:71).

In the context of the networked social media profile, the ‘public image’ is what is shown cumulatively of the self to the audience as a whole. Notably, where merged audience site users interact with people already known from other contexts, their online public image is to some degree expected to be consistent with public images established elsewhere. This conflict of image across contexts, is a major cause of perceptions of inauthenticity on merged audience sites, and fuels perceptions that others are presenting inauthentic images.

It is clear from the findings that merged audience site users often conceive of there being a gap between what a person actually is and how they represent themselves- that is, between their (true) self image, and their public image. The reason for this gap is that others are seen to strive for a particular ‘desired image’, drawn from idealised cultural material, something that is an integral aspect of self-branding. Thus, it is useful to break from Jenkins’ formulation and separate out the ‘desired’ image from the ‘public’ image to conceptualise the role of intent in self-presentation- to separate Goffman’s distinction between ‘impressions given’ and ‘impressions given off’ (Goffman 1967).

**‘Desired image’**, then, refers to what is actively strived for in self-presentation and interaction. There may not be a ‘desired’ image consciously strived for in every interaction, avoiding some critiques of Goffman’s theory that it necessitates too calculating and intentional a process from social actors (Jenkins 2008).

Overall, as will be further illustrated, ‘authentic’ self-presentation requires a congruence of who a person is, what they want to show about themselves, what they show in interaction and how they are received by others. Reframed in the above terms, authentic self-presentation involves a perceived congruence between a person’s self image, desired image and the external and internal aspects of public image. Mismatches or failures of validation can lead to perceived inauthenticity which can have knock on effects upon self image and other aspects of identity and lead to corrective actions. This overall describes how self-presentation and interaction informs a person’s identifications and self conception, and affects the personal narratives they use to make sense of themselves and their identifications, as well as how authenticity can serve as a motivator in social action.

These aspects of ‘personal image’ have a relationship with ‘cultural images’ which partly parallels the relationship between personal narratives and cultural narratives. While interviewees’ framings of both claim that others are drawing too closely on desirable collective representations in representing themselves, following a ‘narrative’ implies following a set pattern of ‘how to live life’, whereas projecting an ‘image’ connotes obscuring the realities of life with something more effusive, consumerist, glossy and superficial. Compare the contrasting connotations of one interviewee’s statement that “everyone has a narrative now instead of a life” with another’s statement that “it’s all about image”. These competing framings in the perspectives of interviewees are an interesting ground level reflection of theorised perceived shifts from the grounded coherence of the narrative to the shifting, connotative fragmentation of the image.

### **The cultural image**

Proceeding from the premise that a cultural image is an aspect of cultural meaning distinct from the cultural narrative, what is a 'cultural image?' This chapter has suggested that in photography sharing, individuals draw from and affirm shared collective cultural images. Yet when site users speak of others 'projecting images', they refer to others drawing on 'images' from culture which are often 'images' in a metaphorical rather than literal sense, linking more to image in the language of advertising and branding. These 'images' of sociability and attractiveness are not literally visual, but have an image-like character in being superficial, glossy, about 'looks' and 'appearances' rather than carrying textual, coherent meanings. They are difficult to categorise as attempts to present one particular type of identity or follow a particular 'narrative', 'style' or 'lifestyle'. It reflects a type of self representation seen as particularly characteristic of branding and marketing, as the use of 'image' suggested here is similar to the use of 'image' in advertising.

The advert attempts to draw upon and reproduce 'cultural images' to link positively valued associations to the brand and the products being sold (Barthes 1977), just as the social networking site user is suggested to draw upon cultural images in the presentation of a 'desired' image in 'marketing' and branding the self (Hearn 2008). Importantly, the meaning of the advert is often conveyed in ways that are indirect and connotative (Leiss et al 1997) and the cultural images they portray create loose sets of image-like associations between their product and other desirable images, styles, lifestyles or particular categories of people. The meaning of the advert is image mediated and sets in place loose chains of image-like signifiers rather than making direct claims.

Cultural images can be given an initial definition as image-like collective cultural representations which act in an associative, connotative way to add diffuse meaning to signs in self-presentation, rather than allowing for a coherent categorisation within cultural 'narratives' or bounded categories of identity. They make meaning by creating associative, connotative links between elements of self-presentation: They connect individual 'signs'- for example, ways of acting, dressing or posing- with other cultural images, and broader collections of styles and lifestyles, in turn linking

these with group identities, such as gender, or class. Through examination of taste, this chapter will suggest that as with advertising, ‘anchorage’ and ‘relay’- the juxtaposition and interplay of one sign with another- can “fix the floating chain of signifieds” and give a discernible meaning when images are juxtaposed (Barthes 1977:39).

As will be elaborated later in the chapter, there is a relationship posited between cultural images, styles and lifestyles, with cultural images serving as the units out of which styles are formed, and lifestyles being partly formed out of styles. Styles are defined here as recognisable modes of dress or aesthetics and collections of linked tastes and images, in keeping with the general use of the term ‘style’ within broader culture. Lifestyles consist of styles, cultural images and tastes, grouped into a more narrative like, coherent set of ideas about ‘how to live life’. This draws upon Giddens’ conception of ‘lifestyle’ as “the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others” (Giddens 1991:83).

To give an example of the proposed relationship between these aspects, there are several ‘cultural images’ associated with wearing a pair of thick black plastic rimmed glasses, which connect them connotatively and vaguely to differing sorts of people, identities, styles and lifestyles, and give them meaning when used in self-presentation. The wearing of these glasses can be anchored by juxtaposition with certain other signs into a presentation of a particular nameable ‘style’. Depending on the juxtaposition of this ‘sign’ with others, this can connote, for example, a ‘hipster’ style, which, in turn, when combined with certain ways of acting, and particular viewpoints, is linked with a broader ‘lifestyle’.

It will be claimed in this chapter that it is less common that someone will directly present themselves in keeping with a particular cultural style or lifestyle, than it is that they will use in their self-presentation a set of signs which connote images which gain part of their meaning through connotative connections to styles and lifestyles.

## **Taste and the ‘image’**

Many aspects of the ‘cultural image’, and its relationship with style and lifestyle can be further explored and illustrated by examining taste and its social meaning in self-presentation. ‘Image’ was part of interviewees’ language for discussing the presentation of taste as well as visual self-presentation. Looking at the role of the cultural image is particularly important in a cultural context in which detraditionalising tendencies and the predominance of ‘image’ have been seen as increasing the importance of taste as a resource for self definition and identification, at the same time as fragmenting and diversifying the social meanings attached to taste.

Taste has gone from being seen as a reflection of divisions such as class and gender, as in Bourdieu’s influential ‘Distinction’ (1984), through being theorised as a means of ‘subcultural’ distinction in counter-cultural resistance, through to a situation where the diversity and profusion of the “seemingly infinite numbers of images (meanings) attached to commodities” (Hand 2012:44; Giddens 1991; Warde 1995) and a playful ‘postmodern’ use of taste have debatably eroded strong divisions of taste and style (Maffelosi 1996; Muggleton 2000). For example, some have suggested that differentiation has become transformed as individuals become “cultural omnivores” who gain cultural capital from consuming a vast variety of eclectic material (Peterson and Kern 1996). Maffelosi’s influential concept of ‘neo-tribal’ sociality holds that young people form loose groupings and shifting allegiances rather than rigidly bound groups based on shared tastes. Others have suggested social actors draw from a plethora of signs to construct identity, display ‘stylistic promiscuity’ and freely swap one look for another in the “supermarket of style” (Polhemus 1996:150; Bennett 1999; Maffelosi 1996; Muggleton 1997; Sweetman 2004).

Networked social media encourage “self-branding” and “taste performances” (Liu 2007; Liu et al 2008; Marwick 2005) and Perkel (2008) has shown that networked social media can be places which place a stress on ‘bricolage’ like remixes of taste. While some (Hodgkinson 2004; Siibak 2009) have found these sites can be places for

the re-entrenchment of subcultural boundaries, Robards and Bennett's study of MySpace found that they encourage a 'fluid' neo-tribal approach to tastes. Their respondents were opposed to rigid subcultural identification, yet the permanency of their social ties and relationships challenged the notion of neo-tribal belonging as involving only short lived connections (2011:314).

As Robards and Bennett found- "the politics of the everyday, bound by issues of taste and belonging which are central to the post-subcultural debate, become the key concern for the average Internet user" (2011:303). Explaining an aspect of the contemporary social meaning of taste as mediated through associative 'cultural images' accounts for several aspects of the contemporary social meaning of taste, as well as showing the role of authenticity in the use of taste.

The example of taste will illustrate several aspects of the relationship between personal and cultural images. It will show that tastes are meaningful 'signs' which connote things about a person's public image due to being linked associatively through cultural images to differing styles, lifestyles, and identities. Authentic self-presentation is seen as ideally avoiding any conscious striving for a 'desired image', yet, as we shall see, there is some expectation that a person's tastes fit their 'image'. In showing how individuals take steps to ensure that their tastes are providing the right- or at least not the wrong- kinds of connotations about themselves when shown in their public image, the proceeding sections will illustrate aspects of the ways in which authenticity motivates impression management strategies to manage the interplay of personal and cultural images. Proceeding sections will also show that the cultural meanings attached to tastes have a cumulative character when displayed in public image, gaining meaning over time in a way that establishes expectations of consistency. Tastes also factor in notions of social difference as they are an element of how gender is differentiated on networked social media, reflecting the prevalence of consumer choice as a means of distinction on networked social media sites.

### **Taste- part of 'who you are'?**

In the context of theorised changes in the meaning of taste, it is worth examining what site users think of the relationship between their tastes and themselves, and to what extent taste is seen to function as a means of showing particular ‘desired images’, group identities and styles. Tastes, in contemporary culture, and especially the language of advertising, are often framed both as a means of reflecting, presenting and defining ‘who you are’ but also as potential resources which can be mobilised to present a particular ‘desired image’, style or lifestyle or identity (Warde 1995). These dual reflective and performative aspects were in evidence in site users’ conceptions of the links between taste and their identities. In discussing taste and its significance, interviewees often rejected the idea of being ‘defined’ by their tastes, yet also recognised that others might define them by them and that tastes could affect their public image.

Vasily expressed a common opinion that tastes were ‘part’ of who you were, but not to a defining extent:

“I consider them to be part of who I am, but I don't think that the vast majority of them define me... Each individual is a combination of traits, interests, opinions, and experiences. And each person decides what part of that they want to push forward the most.”

Because taste was considered as potentially partly reflective of ‘who a person is’, interviewees recognised a possibility for the display of taste as a means of presenting a particular ‘desired image’. However, as with other aspects of self-presentation, this was heavily regulated by a narrative norm of authenticity which considered it inauthentic to purposefully portray a particular ‘desired image’, and valorised a congruence between self image, desired image, public image, and the tastes used in self-presentation.

Emma voiced a belief that what people showed of their tastes and interests was orientated mostly towards the audience:

“I think everyone's interests say a lot about who they are. But a lot of times what people put down as their interests is more about what you want to show



people than what you are totally. And I think people would leave out embarrassing things, or things they think are embarrassing. “

Amanda commented:

“I'd say they like it too, but putting it there is their image. They're trying to look good for a particular group of people.”

Due to tastes' particular linkages with certain lifestyles and styles and subcultural identities, some site users discussed the use of tastes as a means of collective identification, but this was also generally cast as potentially inauthentic. Reflecting the greater tendency for younger people to use tastes as a means of presenting subcultural identification, young people were more likely to see and discuss subcultural identification, but also criticised others for following subcultural trends. Zia, a 20 year old Canadian student living in Singapore, gave an account of her own previous attempts to present a desired image on pseudonymous sites, in line with a particular subcultural identity and style:

“I got heavily into this gothic/grunge/industrial theme especially during High School when I was under a lot of school- and emotional stress, and built this image that I was some tough tomboy who wore black every chance I could, baggy pants, chains, you name it, even though I was eaten up by self-loathing inside. During that time I came across a lot of artists on DA who had raver personas, gothic personas, Nazi-fashion personas, etc. but I knew it was a farce, because it felt like the same game I was playing. ”

She construes the conscious use of tastes to present an image as an inauthentic, shallow farce. This is doubly because she didn't really like the tastes she was showing as much as she pretended to, and because she felt the 'persona' or image she presented was not like she *really* was.

We see here that a self-presentational practice can be felt as inauthentic where it involves a conscious striving for a particular 'desired image', and where there is a perceived gap between self image, desired image and the public image a person is presenting. Rather than taste being valued as a means of indicating a collective group subcultural identity, as a means of signifying connection- taste is framed here as

authentic only when it is reflective of something ‘genuine’, individual and personal. Despite feeling she understood from personal experience why others were inauthentic in this way, Zia was somewhat scornful of those who felt erroneously that they were showing a “unique persona” via subculture, and described the culture where she lived in Singapore as-

“chasing after the newest fad in fashion or music, dressing that way, and then broadcasting to the world that you're hip and trendy.”

This partially reflects attitudes identified by Muggleton and Polhemus as common in contemporary positionings of identity, taste and subculture, which prioritise the use of taste in personalised, individualistic ways- “mixing diverse, eclectic, often contradictory elements into a unique, personal statement” (Polhemus 1996:para 1) rather than using taste as a marker of solidarity with others (Muggleton 2000). As in Robards and Bennett’s study, there is some evidence here of the use of “subcultural frames of reference to act as referents in the process of performance” –as “discursive constructs akin to a palette of tastes to draw from, modify and remix” rather than adhere to strictly (2011:311). However, rather than tastes being seen as resources which can and should be playfully used and remixed, tastes are reaffirmed here as meaningful signs which matter, and which should ideally show ‘who a person is’ in their public image, and which should not be misused in ‘inauthentic’ ways.

### **Conflicts of taste and self**

Interviewees' attitudes to taste tended to prioritise tastes as something natural and pre-social, ideally detached from any attempt to use taste to portray a particular ‘image’. But the ‘naturally emergent’ aspects of tastes complicate authenticity in other ways. Due to their semi-involuntary qualities, tastes were seen as potentially disrupting the authentic congruence of personal image and thus as challenging authenticity by connoting unfitting things about the self. Because of this, some interviewees reported specifically avoiding filling out the ‘taste’ sections of their profiles. This was often combined with a critical attitude towards the use of tastes as a means of self definition or collective identification.

Jill did not fill in her tastes in her profile because “I don’t want to be pigeonholed”. Tastes were seen to be something which could result in her being inaccurately tightly ‘pigeonholed’ or ‘disliked’ in a way that did not fit her desired image, due to their associations and meanings. Interviewee Ben also purposefully avoided showing any tastes but “popular films and tv” because he wished to maintain as ‘neutral’ a public image as possible and he- “didn’t want anything based on a specific set of interests or subculture.”

Simultaneously this shows the importance of taste as a way of signifying meaning in self-presentation and reflects ambivalence towards the meanings it can convey. Some mounted a critique of the importance of tastes as a means of self definition, implicitly taking a critical position towards commodity culture. Image was linked with a ‘marketing rhetoric’ - as Jahi put it- “it’s like marketing yourself.”

Marek, a 27 year old Polish photography student, considered tastes to be an identifying ‘label’ and rejected this process:

“I think that’s a sort of label you just show to other people what stuff you like, and that creates the profile of your personality.”

This critique of taste as ‘labelling’ and ‘pigeonholing’ relates to a recurring individualist framing of the ‘authentic self’ as something which cannot be fully encapsulated by cultural material and collective representation. Notably, site users who took a critical perspective in this way tended to have an especially critical attitude towards the use of these sites, which linked to a distaste for consumerist self-branding.

### **Correcting impressions**

While some resisted definition via tastes entirely, others described ‘editing’ their display of taste to correct the misleading mismatch of self image and public image their tastes would create.

It is a reflection of the importance of the authentic congruence of personal image and the cultural images shown in public image, that despite the common distaste showed for conscious impression management, preserving this congruence was seen as more important than being fully 'honest' about tastes.

Lily described how she would sometimes avoid visibly appreciating tastes she was embarrassed by:

“I do pause before I hit "like" on youtube for example! Knowing my friends can see that!! I think it's more of the cheese factor, or what not. I do watch a lot of "how-to" videos, anything from the craft things to makeup tutorials. I feel superficial for that last part!”

Mercedes had a particularly complex and intense relationship with her tastes, which illustrates several aspects of how tastes can serve as points of identification and cumulatively build up an 'image' of the self. Mercedes felt keenly a pressure from her audience on the pseudonymous site DeviantArt to be consistent to the public image she had established by showing herself to be a fan of 'classic rock'. She felt her interest in Lady Gaga would result in her being negatively 'judged' by her audience due its perceived incompatibility with her 'image':

“I'm known for my strong interest in classic rock and parody... And that attracts a certain group of people who expect me to like the things that they like, I guess. And they have these notions about what PROPER people like, and I guess they're really open about the crap they think is bad or they think that only stupid people like.

Like... if you like the Beatles, the Internet has it in their head that you can't like Lady Gaga. Or if you like Lady Gaga or Bruno Mars or any of the other popular acts these days, then it must mean you're uncultured and that you can't like or understand anything like the Beatles or Elvis or Buddy Holly or what have you. There are all these notions that are flying around you know.

So if I reveal that I like Lady Gaga, say, in front of all of these watchers that I've attracted that worship the Beatles, then they'll think I betrayed them and that I'm one of the people who their group has told them to consider stupid

... I think that I get scared people might think I'm less respectable because,

say, I like Lady Gaga, or I actually enjoy stupid low brow films or actors, because that would change the image that I think most people have on me.”

The public image she was concerned to protect here, built up over time from the signs shown in self-presentation, is not a nameable subcultural identification, a definable lifestyle or style, or a categorical identity like gender or class, but nonetheless represents to her a set of established coherent and cohesive meaningful ideas and aesthetic evaluations which her taste violates.

### **Expectations of taste coherence**

Mercedes’ example shows that despite the loosening of associations between tastes and identity and a contemporary focus upon eclectic mixes of taste, there is still some expectation of ‘taste coherence’ in what is shown in a public image. Overall coherence was not valued in itself, but it was important to avoid tastes which were seen as detrimental or anti-thetical to the others. Tastes are uneven in what they signify, with some having more ‘weight’ in certain contexts than others, reflecting the contextual nature of the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1977) tastes and cultural images can have associated with them. Mercedes commented that unusual tastes that didn’t have a negative weight attached to them as overly mainstream or ‘lowbrow’ would have positive connotations in terms of the cultural images associated with them-

“because people would just think I was quirky or that I was some sort of person with a large horizon. I don’t know, if it affects my image non-negatively, I’m fine with it.”

Her low-brow/high-brow framing reflects the shifting definitions of what counts as ‘classic’ or respectable taste and also shows the persistence of terminology which associates these with divisions of ‘class’.

While this reflects some acceptance and indeed valuation of some breadth of tastes, the ways in which the ‘conflict’ of tastes was raised by a minority of interviewees showed the persistence of taste as a means of distinction and differentiation. Tastes

displayed in public image were to be “quirky but not too quirky” as Rebecca put it.

### **Gender and taste**

As well as the potential for conflict with established public image, some interviewees mentioned the potential for tastes to conflict with a person’s gender. This was seen as particularly likely for men, for whom feminine tastes were described as damaging to their image.

Emma felt young men in particular, due to insecurity, would disavow their ‘feminine’ tastes for fear of the impression it would give:

“I think younger men, more so than older men, have a problem with letting on that they can do things that are more traditionally associated with women. because peers are not always the nicest to guys when they show things that would be considered 'weakness'. Younger men are still finding out who they are a lot of the time, or at least men in my age group are... My dad wouldn't have a problem putting down that he loves gardening and flowers or that he likes baking and cooking. But my father is very secure in who he is and what he likes.”

The comparative conflict caused by a man, particularly a straight man, in displaying tastes considered feminine is rooted in a conception of masculinity as defined “over and against” femininity (Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995). As Bennett et al’s comprehensive survey of taste and differentiation showed, this means that women tend to have a greater diversity of tastes associated with masculinity and femininity, whereas men tend to stick to a narrower set of tastes considered ‘masculine’(2009). Male interviewees were more likely to claim gender differences of taste, perhaps due to the narrower bounds of appropriate 'masculine' taste making them more conscious of boundaries.

However, while there are cultural expectations that women should present themselves in 'feminine' ways, tastes considered feminine are also devalued within culture as a whole (Lawler 2008; Skeggs 1997; Connell 1995) and this means some women take a conscious effort to avoid them, “distancing themselves from

'superficial feminine tastes'" and "engaging with what they see as more serious cultural tastes" (Bennett et al 2009:228). For example, Lily's 'feminine' tastes were perceived by her as embarrassingly superficial, diverging from what is "expected" of her. Mary, a 22 year old shoe shop worker, described herself as "keeping the site pretty free of pink and sparkly stuff." Jill said she would "judge other users" on the taste displayed in their profile layouts if they had "playboy bunny ones, or one of those girly things", and she herself had kept things "gender neutral" for her profile. Concerns about appearing 'superficial' due to feminine tastes were shared by quite a wide range of women, from self-described feminists to those who took quite an essentialist view of gender. This suggests that simultaneous cultural expectations that women present themselves in feminine ways, and cultural devaluations of the feminine, are a common issue for many women. While men may be limited to a narrower range of 'acceptable' tastes, women expressed more anxieties over their tastes seeming 'respectable' than men.

Diverging from gendered expectations as to taste was something which interviewees were very aware of even when unintentional. Lydia, a bio-archaeologist, had been mistaken for male online on forums where her gender was not immediately obvious. The reasons for this were partly due to taste:

"I came across interested in the traditional male things such as knowing about/fixing cars, doing the heavy lifting of things myself, knowing about guns/military history, and also the line of work I was in."

### **Gender differences as taste mediated**

While this shows the ways in which gender can affect a person's display of taste and cause conflicts of image, it was noteworthy that when asked about what would indicate someone's gender online, taste was an important aspect of how gender difference in itself was identified. Overall there was a greater concentration on taste as a marker of gender difference among younger people, possibly reflecting that taste is more important to the identities of younger people, but also forms a greater part of how younger people think about gender.

Mike, evaluating what sort of aspects of his own profile might indicate his gender, suggested:

“Well, maybe my quotes lean a little masculine. I've got a few comic book quotes, and one by Al Pacino.”

Pete, a 24 year old unemployed Canadian, suggested:

“Romantic stuff is more common to females, and darker or more serious material is common to males.”

Yet while taste was the most commonly mentioned indicator of gender difference, there was frequent acknowledgement of the difficulties of neatly mapping tastes onto differing genders, due to overlap between men's and women's tastes.

Pete made claims for a growing homogenisation of taste:

“More and more women have grown up watching Transformers as much as Jem. More men I encounter can watch the girliest anime programming as well as UFC pay-per view stuff. We're all kind of... on the same level. It's like target-demographics are disappearing.”

Here Emma describes her opposition to polarised notion of gender as an influence on both tastes and interests:

“I don't really like the idea that only boys play sports or video games, and that only girls like cooking and fashion. That's not an idea that meshes in my head. I mean, you could look at books or movies that they like. But that's not always a sign either. My husband loves Moulin Rouge and that is a rather 'girly' romance movie.”

Those tastes considered especially likely to indicate someone is female or male link loosely to aspects of emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). For example, tastes concentrating on emotion and bodily adornment link to emphasised femininity. Relatively few tastes still have strong associations of this sort- and tastes identified as 'gendered' were often what might be called the hot pink



and deep blue of gendered taste, skipping over the less saturated areas in between.

The description of notions of gender difference and similarity in terms of tastes, particularly among younger people, supports some claims made by contemporary sociological theory that the detraditionalising effects of modernity have shifted conceptions of identity away from their traditional bases in essentialised notions of difference and towards notions of consumerist choice and individualism (Giddens 1991; Warde 1995). Gender itself here becomes something signified by taste at the level of 'image'. Yet it also shows the ways in which taste endures as a way of defining differentiation. The tastes identified as indicative of gender are indicative of gender due to indirect chains of association which associate them with dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Gender is seen as an underlying, stable aspect of the self which may or may not be signified by a person's taste.

## **Conclusions**

In looking at the multiple dimensions of 'image', this chapter has provided input into ongoing debates about the photographic image and the social meaning of taste and the perceived centrality of self-branding to social networking sites. It has also provided a theorisation of self-presentation in terms of dialectics of image which helps to account for the role of agency, allows for a theorisation of the role of authenticity, and covers aspects of how identity and self-presentation draws upon broader cultural material.

The chapter inputs into debates about the degree of transformation and continuity between 'traditional' and contemporary photography and its uses online, in partly affirming the idea of a generational shift in photography use yet stressing the importance of considering that this is partly the product of changes in social contexts and relationships over the life course. Social networking site users continue to use photography to "articulate their connections to, and initiation into, clans and groups, emphasizing ritualized moments of aging and of coming of age" (Van Dijk 2008:5), drawing upon and repeating cultural images relevant to their local social contexts and

social networks.

The conception of self-presentation as involving dialectics between self image, desired image and public image and cultural images was developed to include the implicit aspects of site users' conceptions of 'image' in self-presentation. This model allows for the theorisation of agency and the distance between intents and results in self-presentation. Conceiving of authenticity as involving a congruence of personal image shows how authenticity can be a motivator for social action in motivating people, for example, to edit the tastes they show to maintain this authentic congruence. Additionally, this terminology helps to explain that concerns about authenticity on these sites are in part a product of cross-contextual conflicts of image, and the perceived ease with which they allow for the presentation of desired images. These aspects of authenticity will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The theorisation of the cultural image as an aspect of how tastes gain and convey their meaning provides insight into debates about the extent to which taste remains as an aspect of social division and collective identification in a 'post-subcultural' era in which the traditional linkages between taste and categories like class and gender are disrupted and transformed. Through looking at the meaning of taste on networked social media sites, we see a partial reflection of detraditionalising, fragmenting tendencies, and a "post-subcultural" orientation to taste which does "value the individual over the collective, elevate difference and heterogeneity over collectivism and conformity" (Muggleton 2000:49).

However, rather than taking the opportunity to "revel in the playful inconstancy of Baudrillard's 'carnival of signs' " (Sweetman 2004:85; Baudrillard 1994) site users were careful about what their tastes connoted. Tastes were seen as reflecting 'who you are' and featured particularly prominently in conceptions of gender difference. Overall, taste and its social meanings appear as partly eroded and diversified, partly reaffirmed as a means of differentiation, and partly resisted as a means of defining the self, in being aligned with an inauthentic process of projecting false 'desired images'. Aspects of this, and the production of social meaning, can be theorised with

reference to a view of an aspect of the dialectics between the self and the social as involving a relationship between personal image and cultural images.

### **Cultural images and the signification of cultural meaning**

The metaphor of 'image' encapsulates that there is a cumulative, associative quality to social meaning of tastes and other signs shown in self-presentation. It is important to consider those aspects of meanings which work in more visual, connotative image-like ways in a culture which provides a rich semiotic palette with which to convey information about the self, with a "complexity that makes written translations of the messages impossible" (Polhemus 1996:15). Tastes, and other signs in self-presentation, can be seen as having cultural images associated with them, which tie them loosely to different 'sorts of people'- to different, styles, identities and lifestyles- to categories of person and ways of living and styling the self.

Cultural images connote rather than denote, making meaning through chains of signification, and are 'image' like, in that their multiple meanings are often only 'anchored' down by cumulatively being presented alongside other tastes and signs in self-presentation. They are image-like in the sense that they have a 'syntactic indeterminacy' (Messaris 1997) - "pictures can be assembled in any order and acquire their rhetorical force through a multiplicity of levels of association, playful punning and complex allusion. As a collagistic repertoire, their use is necessarily embodied and situational" (Chaney 2004:44). This captures that often in self-presentation, there is no clearcut identity, lifestyle or style being conveyed, yet the array of cultural images signified in public image still convey a set of looser meanings. It is only when multiple signs - such as 'black clothes' and 'chains', combine with other signs with similar associations that it becomes possible to discern a clearer meaning and pin down the multiple possible connotations.

The relationship between the personal and the cultural image is also useful in providing an account of how cultural images are reproduced and changed over time. This cumulative building up of images from loose associative chains to more

definable meaning is an aspect of how tastes and other signs come to gain their associations with differing identities, styles and lifestyles in the first place. The 'image' can be seen as the first, least coherent, most fragmented component out of which broader categories of 'style' and 'lifestyle' are made.

Cultural images are formed out of the repeated use of certain signs being displayed in particular ways by people of particular identities in particular contexts, both in everyday interaction and culture representation. For example- the cultural images associated with 'chains' carry with them a set of meanings that are created in part from the combined effect of the 'sort' of people who use them and are portrayed as using them, and attach them to particular subcultures, identities and styles, which in turn affect their meaning when used in self-presentation. This is a two way process, as those who aspire to present themselves as fitting certain identifications draw on the cultural images which are associated with these identities, and cultural images, styles and lifestyles partly draw their associations from who generally presents and incorporates these aspects in personal self-presentation and in broader culture.

The dialectic between personal and cultural images is also an aspect of how styles come to be developed as recognisable groupings of cultural images used frequently and purposefully in combination, and become recognisable as 'lifestyles' when combined with narratives and discourses about how to 'live life'. This accounts for the changing meaning of cultural images and styles over time and their culturally dependent nature. It also describes how certain cultural images and styles can be involved in 'status seeking' processes and be used to gain cultural capital, as certain images, and styles become associated with certain desirable connotations due to association with certain classes or types of people.

The cumulative image-like aspects account for the partial erosion of the rigidity of cultural associations between taste and social categories of identity, while also encapsulating the ways in which tastes and other signs retain looser associative meanings which still have meaning in self-presentation, especially used cumulatively. The relationship between, for example, a particular taste and gender, is

still existent, but image mediated in a way that distances and loosens its association. Signs are not entirely “free floating” (Muggleton 2000) they have signified associations, though the linkages in themselves are more connotative and diffuse. Eclecticism is preferred in the sense of not too closely following a recognisable lifestyle or style, but subcultures still form “frames of reference” (Robards and Bennett 2011), signified via cultural images, and there are boundaries between linked groups of tastes. It is not the case, as might be posited by some ‘post-subcultural’ framings, that there is “no authenticity, no ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played” (Muggleton 2000:27).

Indeed the importance of authenticity as a narrative norm, and of an individualistic view of the self, often critically opposed to the shifting changeability of the image and to self-branding practices, has been reflected throughout this chapter. The kinds of critiques levelled at other users of “projecting an image” or “marketing themselves” both reflect and challenge the notion of ‘image’ and self-branding and consumer tastes as an aspect of self-presentation. To redefine the use of image as relevant to signification in self-presentation is not novel in itself, but it is especially useful in encapsulating the role of authenticity.

Baudrillard and other post-structuralist theorists have posited that the notion of a ‘substance’ underlying the image is illusory- that the image has become all there is. Site users would seem to agree that we are what Baudrillard calls the ‘second phase’ of the image, where the image “masks and perverts a basic reality” (1994:170; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Self-branding encourages the construction of desirable images of self in a way that mirrors the logic of advertising and branding and makes self-as-image into self-as-product (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2005, 2011). Yet their very belief in the ‘reality’ underneath challenges the notion of the self as just ‘one more image’, or something to be 'marketed' and advertised.

Site users' treatment of narrative and image reflects a critical attitude towards self-branding and marketing the self via tastes, the 'demotic' turn and the idea of ordinary life following the patterns of cultural media and mimicking and overlapping with the

lifestyle of the celebrity. Yet in treating others as if they are always presenting images and marketing themselves to an audience, they adopt the position of critical consumers of others' self-presentation, viewing them as if they are meant to be 'consumed' and expecting content to be tellable and engaging. These ambivalences and contradictions cyclically make it harder for site users to present an image that will be considered authentic to others.

This chapter has shown that image and narrative are parallel trends, mapping onto differing aspects of theorised changes in society. Image is concerned with surfaces, fragmentation and indirect linkages, aligning more with postmodern conceptions of an increasingly commodified, image saturated culture (Baudrillard 1994; Hand 2012). Narrative and narrativisation and heightened reflexivity are seen by some as newly important in response to an increased fragmentation of social meaning, due to detraditionalisation and the decline of grand narratives (Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Jenkins 2008; Lawler 2008; Lash 1994). Narrative is theorised as part of how individuals navigate the diffuse meanings of culture and draw upon broader frameworks of discourses and narratives in doing so (Giddens 1991; Somers 1994).

This chapter, and the previous chapter, have shown that networked social media combine a focus upon both these aspects of image and narrative, and this dual focus is reflected not only in what users do on these sites, but in the parallel ways in which site users varyingly use framings of 'narrative' and 'image' in discussing their self-presentation and that of others, and the links between identity and culture. While the process of drawing upon authenticity in response to societal trends towards a profusion of fragmented social meaning is a theorised aspect of 'late modern' society, authenticity has a more complex role in interaction than is often acknowledged, in regulating how both image, narratives and broader discourses are met with and conceptualised at a ground level.

The strong focus on authenticity displayed by site users serves as a potential means of resisting and challenging cultural images and narratives, and critiquing the use of consumer tastes in self definition and self-branding. However, it potentially has a

part to play in encouraging a false naturalisation of identity processes in encouraging a disavowal of the idea that identity and self-presentation can be something which is consciously, reflexively done. These aspects will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Authenticity, self and identity**

Previous chapters have shown that both narrative and image are highly relevant concepts to networked social media, mapping onto differing aspects of theorised societal trends of 'late modern' engagement with reflexive processes of meaning making and postmodern fragmentation. Both narrative and image, however, are met with and critiqued by a strong focus upon authenticity, which has a complex regulatory role beyond that which is usually recognised, and emerges in local contexts in ways which can sometimes place it in opposition to the reflexive processes considered characteristic of the late modern 'reflexive project of the self'. As previous chapters have shown, authenticity is a recurrent and pervasive theme across discussions of self-presentation and interaction online- serving as a means of self-affirmation and as a 'narrative norm' for judging the social practices of others.

This chapter will look in detail at why authenticity plays such an important role in online interaction, looking at what authenticity is and what it does on networked social media. It will take the premise that "authenticity is not an inherent quality or personal attribute... it is, instead, a characteristic established or assigned through the mundane practices of meaning making" (Holstein and Gubrium 2009:123; Peterson 2005; Vannini and Williams 2009). Thus, it will explore reasons *why* as well as how these particular definitions, uses and bounds of what is authentic emerge from these online contexts and how this varies between types of sites.

It might be assumed that this pervasive concern for the authentic is the consequence of concerns for authenticity often being more pervasive and important "when authenticity has been put in doubt" (Peterson 2005:1083; Vannini and Williams 2009). Media reportage has often concentrated on the dangers of deceptive practice online, and superficially, much is doubtful about the 'authenticity' of online interaction (Gatson 2011). However, concerns about authenticity online are not simply the product of the ease of deception, and authenticity online is not merely a measure of how much the online reflects the offline. This will be illustrated in this



chapter via examination of the differences in conceptions of authenticity, self and identity between two types of sites studied in the research, which I term merged audience and pseudonymous sites.

As mentioned in previous chapters, merged audience sites are sites such as social networking sites, which concentrate on contact with a merged audience of contacts previously known from other contexts, often including a mix of friends, family and co-workers, strong and weak ties. They use given names and display personal data, making their users more identifiable than anonymous. Merged audience sites are so ubiquitous and so integrated within contemporary social life that users often described joining them because they had become a necessary tool to keep in touch with family and friends and avoid becoming 'out of the loop'.

Pseudonymous sites are defined as those sites which use avatars and usernames rather than given names and photographs to identify their users. Typically, these sites lack a merged audience and concentrate more on establishing and maintaining new social contacts than maintaining pre-existing ones, and are often arranged around specific topics and interests.

Though merged audience sites have grown increasingly popular in recent years, both pseudonymous and merged audience sites still exist within and outwith the boundaries of Web 2.0. Merged audience and pseudonymous sites have differing uses, allow for different levels of identifiability and anonymity, different relationships with offline life and with the audience, differing levels of control over self-presentation, and degrees of compartmentalisation from other contexts. Looking at the differences these aspects make to conceptions of authenticity and identity illuminates the reasons why and how these concepts emerge differently in response to differing local conditions. As we shall see, rather than affirming the notion that authenticity matters online because of the possibility for deception, merged audience sites, which offer *less* potential for deceptive practice, produce a more narrow, critical definition of the authentic.

After a brief overview of the concept of authenticity and research into authenticity online, this chapter will be split into two sections exploring how aspects of these two types of sites encourage differing conceptions of authenticity, self and identity. The chapter will conclude with an evaluation of how these points of divergence and convergence fit among theorised shifts in contemporary identity and how these input into broader theoretical conceptions of the role of authenticity in society.

### **Authenticity in crisis?**

A strong concern for defining and delineating the authentic can be viewed as one of the ways in which networked social media partly exemplify and partly contradict theorised broader social changes. As McCarthy suggests, “in a thoroughly media saturated world the pursuit of authenticity- and the dramatisation of the real vs the fake, the natural vs the fabricated, the 'real article' vs the phony- has become a cultural preoccupation” (2009:241; Lawler 2008; Lewin and Williams 2009; Mukerji 2007; Peterson 2005). Authenticity is seen by many contemporary social theorists as in short supply and in high demand in a society where stability and coherence are undermined by a profusion of choices- of images, lifestyles and narratives- which provoke a kind of ‘crisis’ of identity which is also in effect a ‘crisis of authenticity’ (Bauman 1996, 2000, 2005; Chaney 2004; Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2009; Sweetman 2004).

In response to this, some theorists view individuals as motivated to “turn inward in order to *find* and feel their 'real selves' and reality more generally” (Lewin and Williams 2009:66; Giddens 1991; Fine 2003; Lawler 2008; Taylor 1991). For Giddens in contemporary society- “the moral thread of self-actualisation is one of *authenticity*... based on 'being true to oneself'. To be true to oneself means finding oneself” (1991:38). Others have posited that detraditionalisation has made authenticity an impossibility and that rather than seeking a grounding through authenticity, social actors revel in fluidity and seek to *avoid* stable meaning and coherence (Baudrillard 1994; Bauman 1996; Chaney 2004). Bauman states, “if the modern ‘problem of identity’ was how to keep it solid and stable, the postmodern

‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open” (1996:18). These differing positions on the role of authenticity map loosely onto distinctions between conceptions of contemporary identity and self as coherent and narrativised, and more postmodern conceptions of the self as fluid and in a state of constant change.

### **Authenticity and the Internet**

Early online environments were often pseudonymous, and in the possibilities they gave for a postmodern experimentation with image and self-presentation, were often taken to challenge authenticity and exemplify a postmodern approach to identity (Carstensen 2009; Kendall 2002; Turkle 1995). Yet over time, with the rise of networked social media, as Carstensen suggests “in contrast to previous hopes and findings in Internet research, which saw the Internet as ‘identity workshops’, authenticity has now become the decisive norm” (2009:38). It is reflective of a change in the discourse about online interaction in itself that by ‘authenticity’ she means merely ‘authenticity’ to offline identity.

Some researchers, such as Miller (2011) and Turkle (2011) have suggested a potential for merged audience sites to have a legitimating, authenticating role in social action, in documenting social relationships and events over time. However, many researchers have shown that on merged audience sites, offline life is often taken as the ‘reality’, which online life can only aim to approximate, and ‘authenticity’ is often taken to mean ‘true to offline life’ (Gatson 2011; Manago et al 2008; Marwick 2011; Sessions 2009; Van Cleemput 2008).

Marwick has suggested that merged audience sites place an exceptionally high value on authenticity, construing it as a ‘natural’ emergent aspect of simply ‘being yourself’, maintaining ‘honesty’ and ‘truthfulness’ (2005, 2011). Yet she suggests these media also encourage audience orientated performance in a way which belies this idea of authenticity as naturally emergent. She identifies self-branding, ‘life-streaming’ and the pursuit of ‘micro-celebrity’ as popular social practices which

make authenticity into a consciously other-orientated performance. Her work in conjunction with Boyd is useful in illustrating the sometimes contradictory pulls caused by requirements of balance in self-presentation, as well the ways in which the merging of audiences on these sites creates impression management problems which threaten authenticity (2010).

This chapter will draw upon these researchers' insights, but bridge a gap in research by taking a comparative approach between the pseudonymous sites which once predominated online, and the merged audience sites which have recently risen to prominence. This is helpful in understanding the diversity of online interaction and changes in online interaction over time, and in illuminating the ways in which site features and relationships with the audience contribute to particular conceptions of self, identity and authenticity.

As we shall see, on merged audience sites, the merged qualities of the audience and the possibility for cross-contextual comparison, result in a narrowed definition of authenticity, and a tendency to view the offline self as the 'true' self of which the mediated online version is a potentially untrustworthy reflection. Their users' focus is on maintaining authenticity and consistency to previously established images. In contrast, on pseudonymous media, where there is a greater compartmentalisation of images and audiences, there is greater freedom to use online environments as a means of reflexive self-seeking. Users of these sites would sometimes describe online interaction as allowing for a *more* authentic version of themselves than was possible in other contexts.

### **Authenticity in Web 2.0 merged audience sites**

This section will resummarise and expand upon aspects of the conceptions of authenticity which underpinned discussions of narrative, image and identity in previous chapters. Previous chapters dealt mostly with merged audience sites, and have shown that being authentic on merged audience sites involves being 'true to yourself' and avoiding 'pretending to be what you are not'. Chapters on image and

narrative showed that there must be an authentic relationship between the self and the audience, avoiding conscious construction while maintaining a balance between being authentic and considering the narrative norms and standards of tellability, intelligibility, coherence and appropriateness. Rather than exemplifying concepts of authenticity as part of a ‘culture of emotional display’ (McCarthy 2009), disclosing too much can be perceived as inappropriately *inauthentically* attention demanding. As Marwick and Boyd remark, site users must “must maintain equilibrium between a contextual social norm of personal authenticity that encourages information-sharing and phatic communication (the oft-cited ‘what I had for breakfast’ example) with the need to keep information private, or at least concealed from certain audiences” (2010:11).

Put in more simple terms by Yvonne, a 31 year old nurse from the US:

“You don't have to pour out your entire life story, and tell the whole world about every last embarrassing thing that ever happened to you, but don't be weird and pretend to be someone you are not either.”

The narrow path of attaining ‘authenticity’ through balance of these factors on these sites is made more difficult by requirements of *consistency* to a merged set of public images established elsewhere, including offline life. Indeed, site users usually considered offline self-presentation to be the reality of which the online representation was only a potentially distorted reflection (Boyd 2007, 2008; Manago et al 2009; Sessions 2009; Van Cleemput 2008). As Sessions found, “users are increasingly anchored to their bodies and expected to effortlessly present an online self mirroring the off-line self” (2009:1). Previous chapters have illustrated that authenticity involves a congruence between how a person views themselves, how they present themselves in interaction, and how they are received by that audience. That is, it involves a congruence of self image, desired image, and the external and internal aspects of public image within interaction.

Authenticity is, then, construed as a personal quality, as something which can be strived for, lost or gained in interaction, while also serving as a narrative norm with a

moral and ethical component, delineating acceptable and unacceptable social practices. It serves as a means of personal motivation, as attaining and maintaining personal authenticity is a positively valued practice and a kind of self-actualisation (Giddens 1991; Lawler 2008; Weigert 2009). Maintaining congruence in particular between self image, desired image and public image serves as a means of affirming a person's sense of 'who they are' (Branaman 1997; Jenkins 2008). Authenticity serves also to regulate relationships between the individual and their audience of friends and contacts, and between a person, their self-presentation, and the cultural images, styles, lifestyles and narratives of broader culture. Authenticity is also often an "implicitly polemical" concept (Marwick 2011; Peterson 2005), constructed in contrast to the inauthenticity of others.

### **Some obvious tensions**

Some questions arise as to *why* this conception of authenticity predominates on merged audience sites. There are some inherent tensions within this conception of authenticity, which also apply to broader individualistic and essentialist conceptions of authenticity, which can cyclically increase a concern for authenticity. Authenticity is construed here in profoundly individualistic unconstructed terms- as about being yourself no matter what others think. Yet authenticity is only attained and maintained by adherence to and presentation of what the local social context sees as an acceptable 'authentic' self-presentation (Branaman 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2009; Marwick 2011). As Ferrera comments, naturalistic, individualistic conceptions of authenticity "set authentic action in opposition not just to 'inauthentic' action, but to social action as such. For social action by definition presupposes that we take the expectations of others into account and that we see ourselves through the eyes of another" (Ferrera 2009:28). Additionally, maintaining the careful balance required to meet merged audience site users' conceptions of authenticity would seem to require the exact kind of careful consideration of audience considered 'inauthentic'. Similarly, despite the distaste expressed for striving to meet particular cultural images and narratives, in presenting themselves in interaction, individuals inevitably draw upon cultural material.

The tensions in this conception of authenticity emerge from and cyclically increase a perception of inauthenticity in others and in broader culture, making authenticity an expression of and a locus of concerns about the proper ‘authentic’ relationship between the self and the social. Concerns about maintaining authenticity are increased by these tensions, but authenticity also serves as a means of ‘solving’ them, via the affirmation of personal authenticity in the face of perceived inauthenticity in others (Lewin and Williams 2009). This links with conceptions that a ‘polemical’ view of authenticity is most common in cultural contexts which call authenticity in question (Lewin and Williams 2009; Peterson 2005).

As will be elaborated in proceeding sections, merged audience sites exacerbate the inherent tensions in individualistic conceptions of authenticity. They make inauthenticity highly visible while also complicating personal authenticity, due to the collapse of once separated audiences. The possibility for cross-contextual comparison makes keenly visible any gaps between the images and narratives presented by others in interaction and the ‘realities’ of their lives, increasing a tendency for others to be perceived as inauthentically image conscious. These aspects both partly result from and also increase a pre-existing tendency to view the offline as the ‘real’ self.

This is further fuelled by tensions related to ambiguities of genre between the use of these sites as ‘technologies of affect’ or ‘technologies of self’. These sites also exemplify many of the aspects of contemporary culture often subject to criticism as ‘inauthentic’, narcissistic and image conscious. All of these aspects provoke a desire to reaffirm individual personal authenticity in the face of perceived inauthentic practice in others.

### **Merged audience sites- the implications of a collapsed social context**

Merged audience sites encourage a different conception of authenticity and self than other sites, primarily because of their ‘merged’ arrangement, which combines

significant others, family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances into a merged group of social ties of various levels of intimacy. As Boyd's research (2007, 2008, 2010) into social networking sites has comprehensively shown, the merged audience can highlight conflicts of public image between self and identity as performed in differing contexts- for example, between the public image established in front of family versus friends. In dramaturgical terms, this context collapse represents a merging of stages, a confusion as to which fronts are appropriate for the given situation, and an ambiguous configuration of 'front stage' and 'back stage' (Paparcharissi 2011; Pearson 2009). This also causes conflicts of public image analogous to Goffman's 'role conflict' in exposing inconsistencies and crossing the bounds of established expectations and relationships (Marwick and Boyd 2010; Goffman 1967).

Self censorship, and a 'diluting down' of content, is encouraged by this arrangement, and ambiguities provoked by the 'invisible audience' as to who is watching can encourage site users to consider the 'worst case scenario' of who might be looking at what they share (Boyd 2008). As Marwick and Boyd state- the merged audience "may create a lowest common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive" (2010:9). Managing this multiplicity of expectations conflicts with the strong focus on being 'true to yourself' in evidence in site users' conceptions of authenticity. However, as shown in previous chapters, most merged audience site users tended to describe themselves as 'editing' what they showed or did not show, rather than as 'censoring' themselves.

Emma's attitude here is typical, and exemplifies the downplaying of construction and the balance related preference for not showing things 'a certain way':

"Don't really think I consciously try and show things one certain way or anything like that. I guess, because I've got parents and family on there, I don't always show the 'evil' side of me I guess you could call it. Just like the things that children don't talk about with their parents because they're 'old and out of touch' kind of things. "



The metaphor of ‘sides’ allows for some acknowledgment of multiple facets of the self, but maintains a metaphor of concealment and revelation of aspects of a whole. A minority of interviewees, especially LGBT interviewees, explicitly mentioned making a more conscious effort to self-censor. This was usually described as a problem compromising their personal authenticity. For example Sandra, a 19 year old from Hawaii, described herself as having to “rein in” her presentation of self on Facebook because of the weight of constraining expectations from her family:

“I feel like they've only ever known this one side of me--the obedient, polite, good girl--and that's all I can bear to show and still meet their approval.”

Parents were the biggest motivation for self-censorship among younger people, particularly young women, and family opinions were also a particular problem for LGBT people, though older people also worried about the opinions of work colleagues and bosses.

### **‘I’m just me’- responses to the merged audience**

It might be expected that the qualities of the merged audience would encourage a view of the self as multi-faceted- as involving multiple identifications and group memberships. Social theorists sometimes characterise multiplicity to be problematic for authenticity because- “if the self is understood as fluid and multiple, it becomes challenging to identify an underlying core that can be labelled genuine” (Davis 2009:5). However, any reflexivity provoked by the collapsed contexts of the merged audience leads to a reaffirmation of the ‘underlying core’ as what remains consistent and constant throughout these competing demands of impression management.

Merged audience site users’ conception of authenticity is often substantialist, essentialist and realist- that is, reflecting a view of the self as a “preformed substance”. This aligns with a “centred” view of the self that holds that subjectivity has an “essential core” (Ferrera 2009:24). This centred, substantialist view of the self enables a reconfiguring of any impression management strategies as a matter of concealment and revelation of an authentic whole, and not as constructing separate

identities or images for differing people.

This view is exemplified by Marissa, a 43 year old unemployed woman from the US, who invoked the language of authentic ‘wholeness’ in her statement:

“I consider the all-encompassing "me" to be accessible on [Facebook]. Meaning the "what" and "who" I am.”

In describing the essential authenticity of her self-presentation she used a statement repeated through several interviewees’ descriptions of how they presented themselves- ‘I’m just me’:

“I’m just me. I don’t try to be anything else but that. I’m sure depending on the different aspects of me that are put out there, people could make their own assumptions of "who I am." But I do not put anything out there that does not come from a place inside of me that is genuine.”

Through processes very different from a conscious reflexive consideration of multiplicity or a project of conscious self-development, the threat to personal authenticity is neutralised and the self is reaffirmed as natural and singular despite its differing ‘aspects’ and ‘interpretations’.

### **Inauthenticity online- commonplace and obvious**

Part of the reason, then, for the conception of authenticity and identity which emerges from merged audience sites is a need to reaffirm the coherence of the self in terms which preserve a sense of the self as individual, counter to the expectations of the merged audience. Notably, however, another factor which encourages the affirmation of personal authenticity, as well as encouraging a critical approach towards others, is how common place and visible inauthenticity is seen to be in others on these sites. As has been shown also in previous chapters, site users often affirmed their own authentic practices by contrasting them with inauthentic practices of others.

For example, Mercedes, in response to questioning of the importance of authenticity online, foregrounded statements about her own authenticity with a criticism of those who ‘lie’ online:

“I don't have much respect for people who lie about who they are... I'm authentic when I'm online in that I don't really...lie about who I am. Sure I might exclude things sometimes, but everything people DO see is me being generally honest even when it's easy not to be. “

The common perception that online environments are a place where mediation makes it ‘easy not to be’ honest and authentic increases concerns about authenticity online.

### **Offline, online and the ‘real’ – the visibility of inauthenticity**

Partly, this reflects a broader view that both mediation and online interaction in general are less ‘authentic’ in making deceptive practice easy. As Gatson states: “There is an implication that it is text—words—that make hiding the (true or authentic) self easier than in the fleshy offline world, where one cannot as easily lie with the presumably more spontaneous language of the body” (2011:225). The media disproportionately focuses on the potential for deception online, which adds to a general cultural tendency to frame the online as something distinct from and less authentic than the ‘real’ (Boellstorff 2009; Dwyer et al 2007). This is in part an extension of a tendency Goffman identifies to mistrust the more “misrepresentable” aspects of what is shown in self-presentation and concentrate on what is less easily manipulated in order to ascertain how genuine someone is being (1967:66; Boyd 2007).

### **Accountability and cross-contextual comparison**

However, it is notable that on merged audience sites this view of an innate greater potential for mediation to result in inauthenticity also often comes hand in hand with a perception that the merged audience makes attempts at inauthentic self-presentation transparently *obvious*. Site users frequently asserted the pointlessness of attempting any large scale deception.

Mike, a 26 year old unemployed man from the US, affirmed his own authenticity against the idea of pointlessly trying to impress:

“I am who I am. I don’t try to impress. After all, the only people who might read it is friends and friends of friends... Most of the people you’re networking with know who you really are. Who are you trying to fool?”

There was seen as being “no point” to ‘pretending to be what you were not’ because you’d be, as Ian put it “setting yourself up for a fall” because, as Mike stated, anyone who tried would “just get their friends hazing them for acting out of character.”

The perception of inauthenticity in others is in part the product of the ways in which the merged audience collapses contexts and gives the possibility for evaluating consistency across online-offline boundaries (Sessions 2009). This makes seemingly inauthentic practice more visible and re-entrenches an existent view that offline self-presentation is more authentic and shows the ‘real’ self (Manago et al 2008). Many judged online self-presentation as inherently less accurate, often considering those who acted differently online than offline to be inauthentically presenting themselves, as shown by Inga’s comment that “when they write they can be a bit different from their real character, their real personality.. it’s playing”. This was particularly common among those who exclusively used merged audience networked social media and seldom interacted online with people they did not already know from other contexts.

These aspects were seen by some to attach accountability to online interaction. Robin stated that on Facebook she was showing “the real me because I’m accountable for my actions and writing online, because it’s exposed to others who know me in real life.” In this sense, merged audience sites actually reduce the potential for large scale inauthenticity while making smaller scale inconsistencies more obvious and transparent.

### **‘Putting your best foot forward’**

These sites were seen to expose attempts to project inauthentic images not just because of the possibility for cross-contextual comparison in itself, but because the merged audience structure works to make transparent the ‘identity work’ and impression management strategies of others in response to the merged audience. To an audience used to seeing a more vibrant and nuanced portrayal in other contexts, it is easy to see why a self-presentation meant for a complex merged audience might seem one sided, sanitised or over idealised. As Davis notes, this involves an exposure of “the identity work that is *supposed* to remain hidden in the so-called 'back stage' ” (2010: para 1).

This is not to suggest that site users do not understand that the way their acquaintances appear to them offline in one context will necessarily be somewhat different from others. Rather, that these sites are seen to make transparent attempts by their acquaintances to put their “best foot forward” and show a desired, idealised public image, based upon cultural narratives, lifestyles and images. Site users perceived a gap between the ‘idealised’ impression given online and the ‘reality’ of their acquaintances’ lives.

Some interviewees, more commonly women, took a more nuanced view of this than others, though usually still contrasted their own practices with those of others. For example Jennifer, a 19 year old student from the US, commented that while she thought it was important personally to be authentic-

“I think it's natural for people to want to show their best selves. That's what we do in life, so that's what we do on the Internet.”

Sarah characterised online self-presentation as-

“Almost like you're your most sparkly self at a party, instead of the "please-don't-talk-to-me" schlubby self if you were running from the car to the 24-h laundromat on the way home from the beach in desperate need of the loo. The difference is often more innocent than calculated, though there's some of each.”

The ‘sparkly party self’, encapsulates the kinds of glamorised, socially orientated image considered commonly pursued by others on these sites. Sarah described her acquaintances as more calculating about the images they tried to project:

“Trying to seem hipper than may actually be the case, or perhaps wanting to hang onto a younger, more individual self than the totally-submerged-in-family-life/duty that you would actually *recognize* on that person circa 2011. People attempting to project the impression "I was so incredibly cool you just can't believe I drive a minivan, can you?" Etc. MUCH of this is consumerist, or comes out as consumerism.”

Her comment that this concentration on ‘image’ and ‘lifestyle’ is ‘consumerist’ flags up the extent to which networked social media are often seen to embody narcissistic, consumerist and ‘image conscious’ aspects of society.

### **Narcissistic culture, inauthenticity and the merged audience**

Ambiguities of genre, and the ease with which merged audience sites seem to align with fears about contemporary society’s image-saturated and narcissistic qualities, increase tendencies for these sites to be considered contentious places for authenticity. These sites present their users with an egocentric context that exerts pressure to be ‘image conscious’ and present the self in a manner suitable for the broad expectations of the merged audience. As Marwick states, these sites also encourage a process of self-branding- “while authenticity is held up as a virtue, social media encourages highly constructed and edited forms of self-presentation that are carefully created to boost popularity and gain status without alienating potential ‘customers’ “ (2010:11).

Exacerbating this are the ambiguities of genre, mentioned earlier in the narrative chapter, as to how much content should be orientated towards the audience. The egocentric structure of the merged audience site seems to provoke some unease in site users due to ambiguities as to what extent they are expected to be a ‘content producer’. As has been shown in previous chapters, site users often claimed themselves to use these sites as ‘technologies of affect’ and not ‘technologies of

self”, while also stressing the importance of authentically ‘being themselves’ regardless of the audience’s interests. Like the ‘micro-celebrities’ in Marwick and Boyd’s research, they “bristle at the notion of audience” because “consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic” (2010:7). Authenticity is something they see themselves as having, in distinction to others, not something they *do* (2010).

Yet site users also to some degree expect others to be ‘content producers’, evaluating their statuses according to narrative standards of tellability, intelligibility and coherence (Parks 2011). And, as we have seen in previous chapters, they also frequently perceive others as narcissistically attempting to project ‘desired images’ for the audience’s validation. Feelings of being a ‘captive audience’ for others’ performances are increased by the sense of social obligation with which many framed their use of the site.

Marwick’s comment that “self-presentation becomes a strategic way to display and garner status” (2010:10) in networked social media, or Boyd’s statement that “the goal is to look cool and achieve peer validation” (2007:3) are attitudes held by site users about the actions of *others*. Site users rejected self-branding, criticising others as inauthentically ‘projecting images’, as trying to fulfil narratives, as trying to market themselves or put on a performance, and as ‘conforming’ to what is expected of them.

Authenticity is often described by theorists as representing an ‘exemplary ideal’ in line with cultural values (Ferrera 2009; Taylor 1991). Interviewees’ perspectives show a strong affirmation of authenticity as a key value in contemporary society (Boyle 2004; Fine 2003; McCarthy 2009). However, it is notable here that while authenticity does here involve the attainment of a specific ‘exemplary ideal’ of authenticity, authenticity is repeatedly defined as *counter* to the inauthenticity of broader culture. There is evidence in site users’ attitudes of Lamla and Boyle’s claims that a counter-conformist, individualistic focus on authenticity has emerged due to a “growing distrust in, and disappointment with, the promises of the field of

consumption” (Lamla 2009: 176; Boyle 2004).

### **Authenticity in merged audience sites – conclusions**

As we have seen, authenticity is an important concept on merged audience sites, serving as a means of personal affirmation and as a morally infused, critical narrative norm for evaluating the practices of others. These sites produce a narrow view of authenticity as involving consistency across contexts, adherence to narrative norms of balance, and the avoidance of any attempt to consciously show a particular ‘desired image’. This links to a substantialist, centred, essentialist view of the authentic self. These views of authenticity and identity emerge because of the ways in which the qualities of the merged audience complicate personal authenticity and expose inconsistencies and gaps in the self-presentation of others, due to the collapse of contexts and the possibility for cross-contextual comparison. Perceptions of inauthenticity as common in others are further exacerbated by ambiguities of genre and the ways in which these sites align with critiques of contemporary culture as image conscious, narcissistic and consumerist.

The desire to reaffirm personal authenticity in the face of a context perceived as saturated with potentials for inauthentic practice causes site users to make a distinction between their own use of these sites- cast as authentic and natural- and a generalised view of the ways in which others use them- cast as inauthentic and image conscious. This creates tensions and inconsistencies in their framing of how much merged audience site users should orient content towards their audience. These tensions in themselves likely cyclically increase a tendency to retreat to simplistic views of the authentic. This desire to affirm authentic self-presentation as naturally emergent, in encouraging taking an unreflexive view towards impression management, may in fact increase the kinds of behaviours and ways of presenting the self which site users criticise as inauthentic.

In discussing social networking sites and their affordances and limitations, researchers have often understated the extent to which site users themselves are



conscious of popular media framings and critical discourses surrounding these sites, which often discuss them in anxiety laced terms as risky, over narcissistic spaces for self-promotion (Boyd 2007; Sessions 2009). Site users seem aware of these discourses and draw upon them as narrative norms as they describe their site use and reaffirm the own position with respect to them.

Whether claiming “everyone has a narrative now instead of a life” or “it's all about image”, interviewees were critical of “labelling”, “marketing yourself”, showing “what you want to show people rather than who you are totally”, and “trying to look good for a particular group of people”. Merged audience sites provoke a resistant critique of self-branding practices, of the 'image' as everything, of the idea of living according to recognisable cultural styles, lifestyles and narratives, of conscious engagement in a reflexive project of the self, of 'narcissism' and voyeurism- in fact of many of the trends identified as central to contemporary society and exemplified in merged audience sites.

They do this because they increase anxieties about inauthenticity, leading site users to draw upon cultural discourses and narrative norms which stress the importance of authenticity and critique society as narcissistic and image focused. Yet it is important to note that while this critique involves counter-discourses and counter-narratives against the promises of consumerist neo-liberal forms of self-development as self-promotion, it in itself is the product of the same individualistic cultural conceptions of the self which encourage the practices which are critiqued. Authenticity as a cultural value emerges as important where it is threatened, but the premises upon which merged audience site users' version of the 'authentic' are built are an individualist, centrist perception of the self which essentialises identity and prioritises the 'pre-social' over the social. The individualist aspects of this conception of self and identity underpin the same social changes which have been seen to produce self-branding (Lamla 2009).

Importantly, the conception of 'authenticity' and self drawn upon is one which to some degree limits agency in falsely naturalising identity and self-presentation while delegitimising conscious impression management strategies and reflexive self-

development. This individualistic, centrist conception of the authentic self delegitimizes necessary aspects of reflexive identity development in denying the necessity of conscious impression management and the role of culture and of others in identity formation. In doing so, while it actually represents a critique of many key aspects of contemporary society, it also hinders a reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the links between the self and the social. Moreover, it must be recognised that as a critique it emerges from ambivalence and anxieties about the use of merged audience sites, yet as authenticity is narrowed in response to these, authenticity itself cyclically becomes more difficult to achieve, complicating impression management and further increasing anxieties. Additionally, while site users do not wish to be seen as content producers or consumers, they perceive others in ways that are reminiscent of the attitude of a critical 'consumer', often treating others as if they are marketing themselves and presenting images for validation, and these ambivalences and contradictions also make 'authentic' self-presentation more difficult to achieve.

This shows that threats to authenticity, and environments which confront people with the multiplicity of social life, need not in fact result in a greater, more multi-faceted and decentred view of self and a more fluid conception of authenticity. Rather, in response to such threats, especially in a mediated context, there may be a reaffirmation of self, identity and authenticity as natural, singular and in a sense pre-social. There is some support here for the view that “a quest for authenticity has risen to the fore in advanced industrial societies, seducing individuals with the promise of the 'really real' (Geertz 1973) and serving as a life-boat to keep them afloat in the uncertain seas of postmodernity” (Lewin and Williams 2009:66; Fine 2003). However the conception of the authentic which emerges here as a ‘lifeboat’ for surety and coherence lacks the ‘reflexive’ qualities often considered a part of this self seeking ‘quest’, showing instead a retreat to essentialist, naturalistic concepts of the ‘real’.

While some other studies have found that there is a potential for merged audience sites to allow for a more authentic exploration of self than is possible offline,

allowing, for example, for experimentation with image (Manago et al 2008; Miller 2011; Pearson 2009; Van Cleemput 2008), the narrow bounds of authenticity here would seem to constrain this. Additionally, the results of some other studies (Miller 2011; Turkle 2011), which found that these sites could serve as a means of legitimating social action and relationships, were only reflected in a very limited sense. These sites were seen by interviewees as occasionally being able to confirm or contradict information from offline contexts, but were treated as secondary and supplementary to offline interaction.

We can see here that merged audience sites, in crossing online and offline boundaries and merging contexts, actually serve to re-entrench some aspects of the perceived online-offline divide. Perceptions of online environments as inherently more inauthentic combine with cross-contextual comparison to confirm a view that the offline self is the 'real' self, of which the online self is a supplemental, less trustworthy reflection.

Due to requirements of consistency to images across contexts, experimentation with gender is made practically impossible, and gender recedes here to a somewhat taken for granted affair, with none of the ambiguities and postmodern potentials considered an aspect of interaction in earlier research into pseudonymous media. This is the aspect of contemporary online authenticity that has led to other studies viewing 'authenticity' online as merely reflecting the degree to which the online is seen to reflect offline life. However, as we have seen, this constitutes an over-simplification of authenticity's role in these environments, as a morally infused narrative norm for self-affirmation and for the critical judgement of others.

That these qualities of authenticity are not solely the product of increased anonymity or increased mediation, can be illustrated by comparing merged audience site users' conceptions of authenticity and the self with the conceptions of pseudonymous site users. This will show that the degree of compartmentalisation and control offered over self-presentation and the audience have an important influence on how authenticity and identity are defined.

### **Pseudonymous sites- a different view of the authentic**

While pseudonymous site users still conceived of a natural, centred and coherent self, their conception of authenticity and self was more multi-faceted, and their conception of authenticity more broad. Online environments were seen as potentially offering a means for *more* authentic self-presentation and interaction than was possible in other contexts.

Lawler notes “people in the West conventionally counterpose *being* an (authentic) identity against *doing* an identity (performing). While the former is assumed to be an expression of 'who we are, really', the latter is usually assumed to be playing a part: a 'false' expression, denying, negating or concealing 'who we are really' ” (2008:101). An important difference between these sites is that while on merged audience sites, authenticity is construed as something you naturally *have* and should maintain, on the pseudonymous site there is space to actively ‘do’ authenticity. There is space to ‘seek’ expression of aspects of the self through experimentation with image and interaction with others. Personal authenticity can, here, be sought in a way reminiscent of Giddens’ ‘reflexive project of the self’ (1991).

As we shall see, the reasons for this differing conception of authenticity and self include the greater level of control these sites give over visual self-presentation, the relationships they support with the audience, and their compartmentalisation from other contexts. This releases site users from expectations that they be consistent to pre-established images from an audience drawn from other contexts, and allows for the presentation and validation of new images in front of new audiences (Hill 2005; Turkle 1995). Enabled by pseudonymity, site users may conceal their gender, appearance, age, and other aspects of themselves and their identifications which would be visible offline, detaching the presentation of identity categories such as gender from the display of the physical body.

In line with the ‘self fashioning’ ‘identity workshop’ potentials of online interaction

considered in early research into online media, these sites facilitate the reflexive development of the self through ‘identity play’ (Danet 1993; Rothblatt 1995; Turkle 1995). As we shall see, however, identity play is not free floating and detached from consequences, and this process is also structured and subject to legitimation by the criteria of authenticity.

### **Being yourself online**

Many pseudonymous site users felt that these sites actually allowed them to ‘be themselves’ more than other contexts. This is because they offered more control over what is shown in self-presentation, and to whom. In face-to-face interaction, individuals have only partial control over their bodily appearance and the verbal and visual cues they give off, and may commonly experience a disconnect between how they wish they appeared, and how they actually do appear and are interpreted by their audience (Boellstorff 2008; Boler 2007; Siibak 2009; Turkle 1995). As interviewee Ben stated:

“I think it's a lot harder to conceal information about yourself IRL [‘in real life’- i.e. in offline interaction], due to obvious indicators like style of clothing, biological sex, accent, gendered behaviour, and general location (which can give away information about socio-economic class, for instance, and consequently political/religious views).”

Feeling more ‘in control’ of both how they presented themselves and how others received them, enabled for some a greater feeling of congruence of self image, desired image and public image. For some, the textual medium in itself simply made them feel better able to express themselves. Thea, a 25 year old trainee teacher from California, exemplified this:

“This is my favorite way to communicate. :) I feel I am the most myself when I'm writing or typing my thoughts out.”

Such users still believed it problematic that they were not able to achieve this same standard of control over how they appeared in face-to-face interaction. For example, Pete felt-

“I'm bad at improv. Being online means I'm not tasked with coming up with something witty or thoughtful on the spot. I have time to prepare, research and analyze.”

While those who were most comfortable with expressing themselves online were often younger people who had 'grown up' with the internet, there were also older people who also felt that online contexts better allowed them to express themselves and their identities.

In keeping with previous studies (Curtis 1992; Kendall 2002; Reid 1994), a few interviewees, particularly women, mentioned that being able to keep their gender, ethnicity or sexuality ambiguous was of use in allowing them to express their views in a way they felt would be taken more seriously, and as ‘unbiased’ by the specifics of their identities. Rather than allowing them to overcome prejudice, this allowed them to merely sidestep it on a personal level by not identifying themselves as a potential target of it. Relatedly, some interviewees stressed the benefits of being able to interact with others, free from pre-conceptions. Bill, a user of Second Life commented:

“The changeability makes it harder to judge others based on superficial things like appearance. You have to get to know people.”

The ability to present yourself as you wish to be seen was particularly important for transgender site users, supporting the work of Hill who found that online environments allow isolated transgender people to gain self knowledge and a sense of community with others (2005:28). Here, they could present themselves as they wished and have their authentic identities validated without being subject to questioning and misgendering based on visual and verbal cues (Boellstorff 2008). As Callum, a 23 year old from Oregon commented:

“I could refer to myself as a man and not be challenged. I could have that nice concise "male" up there on my front page and not have anyone point out my high voice or my hips or breasts or hairless face or try to show me a lacy tank top.”

As well as having greater control over *what* is shown of the self, these sites importantly give greater control over *who* sees what is shown and presented of the self. This has two aspects- firstly, these sites are more compartmentalised from other contexts, so users do not have to manage conflicting sets of expectations and can better maintain privacy. Secondly, and relatedly, they allow for the seeking of new, supportive audiences who can validate and draw out what individuals feel are pre-existing aspects of identity, and provide new potentials for identity development (Boyd 2007, 2008; Hill 2005; Turkle 1995).

Thea commented that-

“There are aspects of myself I don't feel comfortable sharing or talking about with most people...I'm a lesbian myself, but I am very selective about who I share that with because the reactions of some people make me very uncomfortable.”

Robert, a 25 year old transgender man, was able to express online what he felt unable to find a supportive audience for offline:

“Usually I vent on Tumblr what I am 'not supposed to talk about' in RL. Especially because I know a good friend is on the other end listening.. People who know me casual, hell even family, do not see these sides of me because 'I'm not supposed to be that way'. ”

This was contingent on his ability to compartmentalise these contexts:

“Unless people were diligent (or an online friend) they would not be able to connect my online accounts between websites. And on the other hand, people do not have expectations if they do not know what you (I) look like.”

Elliot, a 42 year old transgender man from Manchester, described how merged audience sites made it difficult for him to “keep everything secure” and control information:

“The trouble is there are people who know me in RL - extended family mainly, and old friends that I'm not really in touch with any more, who don't know that I'm transitioning. I want to control who knows and when, and how I tell them. And since most of the people are on Facebook, control is harder.”

This was in contrast to the positive experience he'd had on the pseudonymous blogging community dreamWidth:

“They're friends I don't need to hide anything from. [I have] more like... more trust? those friends on dreamwidth have been with me all through my transition so far. they've seen me change so there's nothing to hide from them.”

This shows how the ability to 'seek' a self-selected audience to allow for the expression of aspects of identity is an important aspect of these sites' ability to allow for more authentic expression (Hill 2005). This provides a means of creating new friendships and building a sense of community with others based upon common identities, perspectives and interests. Thea pointed out that online media provide suitable audiences for the expression of many differing views and identities:

“There are groups and community for everything online where you can find kindred spirits who identify or think in ways similar to yourself.”

Branaman, drawing on Goffman's work, comments that “the self is a social product. There is no essence that exists inside an individual waiting for expression. Rather, the sense of self arises as a result of publically validated performances... Even though individuals play an active role in fashioning these self indicating performances, they are generally constrained to present images of themselves which can be socially supported. ” (Branaman 1997:xlvi). This ability to seek supportive audiences, and preserve compartmentalisation from other contexts, can allow pseudonymous site users to achieve online a congruence of self image, desired image and public image which they could not achieve offline (Boyd 2007, 2008; Hill 2005). This can validate what site users feel are pre-existing aspects of their identities as well as drawing out new potentials.

There is a cyclical relationship between the pseudonymous sites' enabling of compartmentalisation and the seeking of audiences supportive of identity development and authentic expression, and the types of people who are attracted to the use of these sites and the uses they put them to. That is, their ability to provide



the opportunities they do is cyclically increased by the fact that the users who are drawn to these sites are more likely to need and seek this type of interaction, development and validation online with the 'like-minded'. However, many site users described themselves as having joined pseudonymous sites for reasons unrelated to their possibilities in this regard, and as only becoming aware of these possibilities later. This suggests they do not simply attract audiences who are already interested in processes of identity development, but provide a context which can encourage their users' awareness of unrealised possibilities.

### **Finding your(selves)**

These sites were seen by some as spaces where experimentation with image could be part of a reflexive project of self-development. While this was often framed as a means of developing pre-existing potentials within the self, it was seen also as providing a source of self-knowledge.

Gender was a particularly important aspect of this experimentation, especially in more visually rich environments like Second Life. Both transgender and cisgender site users described how experimentation with presenting different gendered images informed and affirmed their own gender identity and relationship with masculinity and femininity.

Marissa, who used Second Life as well as merged audience sites, summed up what she felt were two potential attitudes towards gender and experimentation:

“From what I have encountered there seems to be two main camps 1. people who just want to experience "life" from the other gender and 2. people who are not happy/comfortable with their RL gender and want to live in SL how they feel they were meant to be in RL.”

Trying out presenting the self as another gender was described by many as a learning experience. Some felt their own gender identities validated by the strange, discomfited inauthentic feeling of interacting as another gender. One female interviewee claimed that her male avatar had been easily seen through as a

‘deception’ by an audience who ‘pegged her as female’- “when I had my male avatar, I just could not act like a male.”

Others found themselves experiencing and expressing new aspects of themselves through experimentation with gender. Those who regularly or solely used an avatar of a different gender to their offline gender identity, asserted that despite this disjuncture with offline presentation, their presentation remained authentic (Boellstorff 2008). Experimentation with gender was particularly important for some cisgender male users who found freedom in presenting themselves as female online.

Eduard, a 40 year old from Germany, explained:

“ I figured I could try to be more emotive and open when being a woman - since I had difficulties with openness and emotions in RL at that time, I thought it could be a good way to learn to express my self without the usual prejudice. You know, like "men don't cry"; "men don't do this it's gay", "Men don't do that".. Actually I feel more free when I use [my female avatar] thus .. yes, more like myself, like not wearing a mask.”

He experiences his online existence in his female avatar- mediated and constructed as it is- as something stripped of artifice, which reveals essential qualities of himself. Ralf, a 42 year old Canadian engineer living in Germany, described initially having used an avatar that approximated his offline looks. However-

“He was so much me that I felt restricted in what he could try. As though I'd said to myself "go create RL-you in this virtual world. With all my hesitancy and shyness and insecurities and baggage. because that is who he was.”

His female avatar he described as-

“Looking nothing like rl me, but it expresses how I feel here. In that sense, I feel that it's realistic to an aspect of my soul.”

In an interesting inversion of the liberation experienced by female site users for whom the ability to be taken as male meant a release from gendered expectations and sexist prejudice, male site users felt that presenting the self as female was liberatory in enabling “a greater emotional range” (Turtle 1995:222).

## **Performance and multiplicity**

This experimentation with gendered image here parallels Turkle's early work on 'gender masquerade' (1995). Interviewees themselves sometimes used dramaturgical metaphors of identity and its presentation – talking of trying out different 'parts' or 'different masks'. They viewed the self as still having an essential core and a 'centred' self, but the self was conceptualised as more multi-faceted, and informed overall by the dialectics of interaction. Talk of 'editing' was absent, and some specifically mentioned how their multiple avatars facilitated the expression of multiple parts of themselves.

For example Ralf characterised his avatar as virtually representing a "minority personality" within him, as expressing "bits of myself (myselfes) that don't get let out to play in rl."

Stephanie, a user of Second life, stated:

"I interviewed an actress once who said all the roles she plays are some aspect of herself and she gets to explore them. I feel like that with my avatars too. When you role-play you learn about who you are and who you are not. Both your limits and how to challenge yourself."

The external-internal dialectics between self, desired image and public image here have the potential to validate new 'images' and develop self image and identity. Individuals can here 'try out' a desired image in front of an audience, with the responses they receive feeding back into self image (Turkle 1995). Here, interviewees brought emotional feelings into their definitions of the 'authentic', as authentic expression was defined as a matter of 'feeling' comfortable and natural – with an overall congruence of self image, desired image and public image.

## **The limits of ethical experimentation**

Turkle's framing of pseudonymous media as allowing for the ability to play with and try out differing identities is to some degree reflected here (1995). However, the findings do not easily support her statement that, "the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit" (1995:185). The self is centred, and there are limits to experimentation, due to the ways in which authenticity places limits on practice (Boler 2007; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Kendall 2002).

Here is not a postmodern free-for-all of continuous experimentation. There remains a conception that the offline, physical self is the "arbiter of truth" (Boler 2007) and congruence of online and offline self-presentation and image is still considered ideal. Self-presentation and experimentation with image is only validated where it involves an 'authentic' congruence of self image, desired image and public image. Overall there is an affirmation of the coherence of self and identity through multiplicity and experimentation, with identity play informing a larger project of the self.

Experimentation becomes unacceptable and is considered deceptive where it involves lying about or concealing significant information from others with whom strong interpersonal connections have been developed. As with many previous studies of pseudonymous sites (Kendall 2002; Turkle 1995), interviewees had painful experiences relating to the possibilities these sites give for presenting the self very differently from in offline life. It is an indication of the importance of gender as an aspect of identity and sexuality, that most of the accounts given of 'deceptive' presentation involved people- usually men- concealing offline gender and becoming involved in relationships.

Thea described a very painful incident in which her friend had actually committed suicide in the fall out from deception over a relationship. Gordon, a 42 year old unemployed nurse from Scotland, criticised a male friend of his for getting involved with a woman while using a female avatar:

"I really object to the phenomenon of straight males deceiving gay or bisexual women. I just don't think betraying peoples' trust in that way is ever appropriate. It's playing dangerous games with people's emotions."

The use of identity play and experimentation, even for authentic self-development, was described as ideally avoiding the development of significant, especially romantic ties. Some interviewees who had experimented with image and felt they had developed a better authentic understanding of themselves nonetheless felt strong guilt about their offline identities not matching how they presented themselves online.

For example, Eduard felt deeply conflicted about having deceived his female presenting online lover. He spoke of potentially leaving - “several times I considered leaving SL, because I "deceive" too many”. Throughout his description of this he nonetheless stressed how authentic his self-presentation felt to himself and to others.

Despite the very real capacity for emotionally damaging deception on a scale far greater than in merged audience sites, pseudonymous site users valued authenticity but did not take such a critical view to any but the most extreme of inauthentic behaviours. This is likely because the possibility for larger scale deception means that minor divergences from the offline are seen as less serious, and because there is less potential for cross-contextual comparison. Overall pseudonymous site users viewed mediation and anonymity as having positive as well as negative potentials, and their view of online interaction was generally more positive than that of those who used only merged audience sites.

Notably absent from discussions of self and authenticity on these sites was the kind of hyper-critical focus so intrinsic to the discussion of identity and self-presentation on merged audience sites. There was some tendency still, for site users to critique others who too closely seemed to model their self-presentation after, for example, particular subcultural images, styles and lifestyles. However, pseudonymous site users seemed to feel more free to use cultural narratives, discourses, images and lifestyles in their self-presentation online, viewing them as resources they could reflexively “elect and re-combine in order to let the panopoly of cultural choices available function as resources for new forms of creative expression” (Chaney

2004:40).

### **Attitudes to merged audience sites**

While they tended to have positive attitudes towards pseudonymous media, users of pseudonymous sites tended to have more negative attitudes towards merged audience sites. They often expressed a wariness over their comparative lack of control, compartmentalisation, anonymity and privacy, casting them as less rewarding and more restrained by the qualities of the merged audience due to being “tied to rl”.

Callum’s summation of the differences neatly incorporates many of the themes discussed in this chapter:

“It seems that some sites like Facebook - speaking mainly as an observer, here - are pretty much just extensions of in-person life, with exaggerations of certain aspects, because the friends and relatives and classmates and so on that you deal with in day to day life know what you get up to on there, whereas dA/Tumblr/etc allow greater freedom to explore yourself.”

More critically, Ralf claimed “fb is a stale crust of bread compared to the banquet of SL”.

Some site users expressed concern about the predominance of merged audience sites. Thea was a long term user of many different online media who felt that online interaction and expectations of authenticity had been transformed by the dominance of merged audience sites. There are several interesting points about the positive and negative sides of pseudonymity and identity play in her account:

“There's more accountability now than there was in the "wild west" days of the Internet in the 90's and early 2000's. Many of my online friends had alternate "online personas" -- made up friends to make themselves seem/feel more popular, or to create drama, or to "troll." Now there isn't as clear a divide between who you are online and who you are in person. It used to be I didn't even know the gender of some of my online acquaintances -- now I can go on Facebook and find out who they're dating, what they look like, sometimes even their home address and phone number, and barely anyone

bats an eye at sharing such information... It's very difficult to remain anonymous online anymore."

She felt that the audience merging and the consolidation of online identities from different places had limited her freedom of expression online. Interestingly, the word she used for this is being more "open" and yet she spoke of it causing her to become more closed and guarded:

"I think, in some ways, being more "open" has also caused a lot more introvertness. I know I, myself, use to be a fairly prolific LiveJournaler, but I have not written in it for several years now because too many people I knew in person were also friends there, and I didn't want to cause any hurt feelings by speaking openly about my frustrations."

This shows again the importance of 'control' over self-presentation and of the compartmentalisation of audiences, to how online interaction is experienced by site users.

### **Online media- 'anonymous and disembodied?'**

In addressing the potentials and affordances of these media, and the nuanced ways in which these are structured by authenticity, this chapter has provided input into long standing debates about online interaction. In describing early pseudonymous media, researchers often debated the risks and affordances of these media as 'anonymous', 'detached' and 'disembodied' social spaces (Danet 1993; Rothblatt 1995; Turkle 1995). They tended to overstate the fluidity of online social identities, obscuring the ways in which authenticity and the development of significant social ties place limitations on identity play (Boler 2007; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Herring 1994; O'Brien 1999).

This chapter has shown that the ability to use online interaction as a means of validating desired images and developing identity is enabled by relative anonymity, because this allows for the ability to compartmentalise the audience. However, this is dependent also upon the establishment of social ties, and interaction is not usually

fleeting- there is a requirement to remain consistent to the expectations of those with whom friendships develop.

For example, Gemma, a 20 year old student from the US, felt it was easier online to start off seeming to be “who you want to be”, but that over time, once a person was known, any pretence would become stripped back and trust would develop:

“Who you talk to on the Internet is the person that they want to be. Sometimes that is simply to be an honest person and the amount that is made up is nonexistent, or it could be a completely novel character that is almost entirely imaginary. In my experiences though, the more interaction you have with the same person, the more relaxed the both of you get and the both of you are more able to trust each other. It's just like that in real life, except that the process is longer and more difficult on the Internet.”

It is a mistake, then, to consider these environments fully anonymous, detached, or as lacking in accountability. There remain expectations of consistency, and also of honesty about when there is a lack of congruence between online and offline self-presentation.

Ideas of these sites as places for free floating identity play have been countered by others who have critiqued notions of identity as ‘detached’ and ‘disembodied’ online and pointed out how significant social divisions such as gender persist online (Armentor-Cota 2011; Baym 2000; Boler 2007; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Herring 1994; Kendall 2002; O’Brien 1999; Van Doorn 2011).

The body online indeed emerges as an ‘anchor’ and ‘arbiter of truth’ of sorts (Boler 2007; Kendall 2002; Manago et al 2008), which serves to limit the extent to which online representations can progress without it as a referent. The ‘sedimented effects’ of lived experience and social inequalities persist online and it is thus inaccurate to call online interaction ‘disembodied’ or quite ‘detached’ from the offline (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002). Online interaction takes place at the interface between offline and online (Gajjala 2009), and as Boler notes, it is important not to treat these spaces as ‘transcending’ inequalities because of their detachment from visual cues of gender and other significant categories of identity. To do so can end up falling into Boler



calls a 'Cartesian dualism', which falsely situates inequalities in the body and not in the sedimented effects of social structures which create power inequalities (2007).

However, those who have pointed out the limitations of experimentation with gender and other identity categories often have neglected that authenticity does more than simply limit or quash the liberatory potentials of these sites. Authenticity sets moral and ethical limitations on what is considered legitimate and honest as identity play, but this delineation of the authentic is also what makes identity play *matter* on these sites. It is the ability for authentic experience through the validation of images on these sites which makes them environments which allow for limited but significant reflexive identity development. An examination of the role of authenticity gives insight into the affordances and limitations of these sites, in a way that goes beyond considering these sites as postmodern 'identity workshops' or simple reflections of the inequities of offline contexts.

## **Conclusions**

Over time, there has been a shift away from early debates about whether online environments are potential 'identity workshops' for 'self fashioning' and self seeking, towards a view of online environments as newly, tightly fastened to offline life in a way that makes identity play impossible and reduces authenticity to 'consistency to offline life' (Carstensen 2009). As merged audience sites have grown to predominate, anonymity and the postmodern potentials of identity play have faded into a new concentration on accountability, identifiability and visibility (Boyd 2008). But while these distinctions are reflected in the differences between merged audience and pseudonymous sites, a simple polarisation along these lines does not do justice to the complexities of the differences and similarities. Authenticity as a concept is crucial to understanding the nuances of differences between site users' conceptions of identity and self on these sites. The results show a distinction between the conceptions of self and authenticity encouraged by merged audience sites, which concentrate on maintaining authenticity, and pseudonymous sites, which allow for the reflexive seeking of authenticity.

As we have seen from the comparison of these two types of site, the reasons why these differing sites and their uses produce differing discourses of identity, authenticity and self have to do with the ways in which authenticity is dialectically produced in response to local concerns and conditions. Authenticity serves as a means of self-affirmation and as a means of assuaging doubts and challenges to self-coherence (Holstein and Gubrium 2009).

The results partly reflect that authenticity is most important when it is ‘placed into doubt’ (Peterson 2005), but this doubt is not straightforwardly a product of the possibility for ‘deception’ online. Indeed, pseudonymous sites, which offer *more* potential for deceptive social practice, actually encourage a broader, more lax attitude towards authenticity than merged audience sites, which make inauthenticity relatively difficult but more visible.

These sites produce differing discourses of authenticity and identity, due to differing purposes, relationships with the audience and with offline life, and different degrees of compartmentalisation and control. The extent to which these sites preserve the compartmentalisation of contexts affects the extent to which personal authenticity is challenged by multiplicity, and the degree to which inauthentic practice is visible in others.

As we have seen, on the merged audience site, the lack of compartmentalisation makes multiplicity a threat to personal authenticity, due to the context collapse and the visibility of the ‘out of context’ identity work of others. Site users reaffirm the wholeness and unity of their identities by viewing themselves as giving glimpses over time of the authentic, singular ‘pre-formed’ whole of themselves. This is reminiscent of Liu et al’s description of Simmel’s characterisation of identity “using the metaphor of our life’s materials as a broken glass—in each shard... we see a partial reflection of our identity. The sum of these shards never fully capture our individuality, but they do begin to approach it” (Simmel, 1908, in Liu et al, 2008:43).

Theorists have sometimes posited that cultural conditions which threaten personal authenticity and the coherence of self may provoke a rejection of the importance of authenticity or an embrace of a more fluid, polysemous way of looking at the self (Bauman 1996; Chaney 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Alternatively, they have been seen to encourage a project of reflexive ‘self seeking’ (Giddens 1991; Lawler 2008; Warde 1995). However, the research shows that they in fact can provoke a reaffirmation of a more singular, narrowed, pre-reflexive definition of the ‘authentic self’.

The results also show that contexts which exemplify ‘image conscious’, egocentric and consumerist aspects of society may provoke a strong backlash, which reasserts an essentialist ‘authenticity’ in the face of perceived inauthentic cultural practice. Though merged audience sites may encourage egocentric, narcissistic, consumerist aspects of contemporary culture, they also provoke with them a strong and resistant critique of these aspects in terms reminiscent of critiques of postmodernity as “fragmented, narcissistic, fantasy driven, empty, image driven, and superficial” (Hart 2011:1).

The combination of traditional ties and postmodern destabilising conditions on merged audience sites produces an individualist rejection of postmodern fluidity and the notion of being ‘fixed’ by ‘traditional’ expectations, but also a rejection of a ‘late modern’ project of reflexive seeking. Authenticity is a concept here used to reaffirm the substantial, centred coherence of the self- what Goffman terms the ‘sacred’ pre-social aspects of the self, embattled but valorised against collective inauthenticity and conformity (1967, 1969).

While distinctions between these sites in part have to do with the differing uses to which they are put and the audiences they attract, the results do suggest that the ability to use online environments as a means of reflexive self-development and the validation of new images is contingent on an ability to compartmentalise the audience. This preserves the pre-existing segmentation of ‘lifestyle sectors’ (Giddens 1991), and allows for the seeking of new audiences who can, through dialectical

processes, validate multiple desired images and feed back into self image, thus informing a reflexive project of the self.

It is only on the pseudonymous site where identity is seen as something which can be 'done' and authenticity is something which can be sought, rather than as an essential quality individuals merely 'have'. There are aspects of Bauman's postmodern 'tourist' and 'stroller' here as the compartmentalised context gives actions less consequences and makes them less fixed, allowing for the trying on of images in "self contained" "episodic encounters" (1996:25). However, while pseudonymous site users may embrace postmodern multiplicity via experimentation, this informs a still cohesive, centred and substantialist idea of the self.

Davis, drawing on Lifton's conception of the 'protean' self, theorises how the very multiplicity of identity can be drawn upon to produce coherence and develop identity. Through a process of "differentiation and integration", individuals find coherence through differing forms of 'self expression', and originally separate "strands" of a "web of development" become integrated into an overall cohesive sense of self (2009:5). This can be reframed as a process of incorporating experiences and identifications over time into conceptions of the self through processes of narrativisation. Authenticity as a concept serves as a guiding norm for stitching together episodic experience into a meaningful coherent personal narrative over time, selecting and sorting the significant from the insignificant results of play with image. As Hill states, "the more a person explores an undeveloped aspect of their identity online, the more they integrate it into their 'real life' self" (2005:28). Rather than representing a groundless, limitless postmodernist embrace of multiplicity, this represents a late modern reflexive project of the self as using authenticity to find coherence and validation through multiplicity.

For Goffman and other dramaturgical theorists, as well as more post-structuralist theorists, the notion of an authentic 'underlying core' self is often taken as illusory. There is no 'actor behind the mask' only "a string of facades derived from encounters with others on the social stage" (in Glass 2009: para 6; Goffman 1967;

Chaney 2004; Lawler 2008). Yet belief in authenticity, as we have seen, has a powerful role in shaping how identity, self and the social are constructed and experienced. In both types of sites it is used as a structuring, reaffirming and validating concept- a problem solver, used to affirm self-coherence and surety. It provides a narrative norm which allows individuals to navigate the complexity of their multi-faceted social existence through local conditions, while preserving a sense of their individualism and self-coherence.

While both merged audience and pseudonymous sites are likely to continue to exist online, merged audience sites' increasing predominance has implications for the positioning of online interaction as a whole within culture and for the future affordances of online interaction. Even as the Internet has become more integrated into everyday life, discourses of online interaction seem in a sense 'haunted' by a discourse which positions it as separated and 'less real' (Gatson 2011). The results show that the increasing merging and blurring of online and offline contexts can paradoxically lead to a view of online interaction as less authentic, re-inscribing rather than challenging a view that online interaction is a secondary reflection of offline life.

Developments, such as the increasing proliferation of the possibility to 'login via Facebook', which reduce the control users have over the compartmentalisation of the audiences they interact with, will likely increase the proliferation of a hyper-critical concern for delineating the authentic. This will have consequences for the future affordances of online interaction, and also for how gender is negotiated and experienced online. The implications of these conceptions of authenticity and identity and their potentials for gender will be described in detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Gender in networked social media**

Research findings discussed in previous chapters on narrative, image, and authenticity have interesting implications for how gender is conceived of, presented and experienced online. As this chapter will elaborate and expand upon, these findings have broader relevance to now neglected debates about online environments as potential spaces for identity play, experimentation with gender, and the interrogation of gender norms.

Recent decades have seen a transformation in how gender and the Internet has been framed, discussed and investigated within social research (Carstensen 2009). In the 1990s through to the early 2000s, researchers debated the potentials and limitations of the then mostly pseudonymous Internet as a place for anonymised identity play, gender masquerade, and potential liberation from the ‘tyranny of gender’ (Danet 1996:129; Rothblatt 1995; Turkle 1995). These utopian framings met with a backlash from researchers who were quick to show how gender inequalities continued and even were potentially deepened online (Armentor-Cota 2011; Boler 2007; Brennan 2008; Carstensen 2009; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Herring 1994; Kendall 2002; McRae 1996; Nakamura 2002).

Since Web 2.0 networked social media have risen to prominence, debates about the potentials and affordances of anonymous identity play and ‘gender masquerade’ have given way to consideration of the privacy and impression management concerns provoked by merged audience sites (Carstensen 2009). As the Internet has become integrated into daily life, gender itself has become more taken for granted within research into online media, a process hastened by the prevalence of merged audience media which lack the potential for anonymity and identity play offered by more pseudonymous sites. Yet many of the early debates about the potentials and limitations of online spaces, and the impact of the possibilities provided for disruption of the “falsely naturalised unity” of “anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance” (Butler 1990:137) still have relevance to contemporary online interaction, particularly given the persistence of pseudonymous media both within

and outwith Web 2.0.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the implications of the previous chapters for the study of online gender, describing how these in themselves contribute to and further an understanding of the potentials and limitations of online spaces for gender and the structuring factors which contribute to them, particularly in highlighting the role of authenticity.

Progressing from this, this chapter has several aims: to examine and theorise multiple aspects of gender as identity and process; to look at site users' conceptions of gender, masculinities and femininities and how image, narrative and authenticity feature as aspects of these conceptions; to consider reflexivity and agency by looking at how conscious site users see themselves and others as being of presenting gender; and to consider the role of authenticity and agency in processes of experiencing, reproducing and resisting gender, working towards a theorisation of gender that avoids voluntarism or determinism.

It aims to investigate the multiple aspects of how gender is experienced, reproduced and conceptualised, looking at gender as both something felt and experienced and identified with, something 'done' in self presentation and interaction, and something done to others in interaction, as individuals both gender others and are subjected to gendering processes by others. Thus, it will deal with how site users conceptualise masculinity and femininity and attribute gender to others, as well as how they have experienced being subject to gender attribution processes themselves. This will also involve looking at how image, narrative and authenticity feature in conceptions of masculinities and femininities, and at how much the critical attitude site users take towards consciously drawing upon culturally desirable cultural images and narratives applies to the presentation of gender.

Previous chapters have shown that many site users consider it inauthentic to obviously consciously draw upon and represent cultural images, styles and narratives in self presentation. This in part rests upon a conception that 'authentic' self-presentation is ideally unconstructed and unreflexive and detached from social

expectations and ideals. This makes it important, in considering the role of agency and reflexivity, to consider the extent to which site users perceive others as consciously, reflexively performing gender, as well as at how individuals feel about their own relationship with gender and its presentation. This will involve examining how conscious site users feel of being treated in gendered ways, and how gender affects dialectics of personal image. Particular attention will be paid to situations in which site users' personal image and personal authenticity were disrupted by being subjected to gendered treatment, making them 'conscious' of their gender online, as well as to the ways in which some site users critiqued and resisted normative ideas of gender. Throughout, this will involve an examination of how gendering processes can interact with the individualistic, essentialist conception of the 'authentic self' identified in earlier chapters, and the ways in which authenticity can serve as a means of naturalising or resisting dominant conceptions of gender.

Overall, this chapter aims to develop a theorisation of a gender that accounts for gender as a "durable but not immutable phenomenon" (McNay 2000:1), accounting for how gender is both reproduced and resisted online in a way that avoids voluntarism or determinism. This theorisation will progress from examination of how site users themselves conceive of, interact with, resist and reify ideas of gender. It will aim to take into account the agency of individuals and their reflexive potentials, while also acknowledging the continued power imbalances within society which place constraint upon freedom of choice. 'Hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity' (Connell 1987, 1995) will be examined as key overarching influences upon how gender is conceived of and experienced, and the chapter's conclusion will briefly address some of the difficulties in theorising multiple masculinities and femininities.

Gender's multiple aspects will be explored as a dialectical process of self identification, performance based upon this identification in interaction, and identification by others: having a gender, doing gender, and having gender 'done to you' through interactions with others. It will be claimed that the neglect of various aspects of these dialectics is a failing of some conceptions of gender- particularly



conceptions of gender as ‘performance’.

The PhD aims to develop a concept of identity which takes into account multiple elements of the dialectics between self and culture, such as between personal and cultural narratives and images, while accounting for the role of power and reflexivity in continuing and resisting social inequality. Gender provides a useful means with which to interrogate the multiple aspects of these conceptions and dialectics. It is, of course, important not only as a means for the interrogation of theory but as an aspect of society which still exerts considerable force worldwide upon the freedoms and life potentials of individuals.

Despite gender’s position as a particularly durable and important means of social differentiation with far reaching effects on society, it is notable that broad theories of social action and change tend not to draw in depth upon feminist thought or investigate the complexities of gender in their explanations of social action and identity. McNay claims this has a negative effect as “thought of subjectification and agency within social theory is weakened by the lack of consideration given to issues of gender identity” (McNay 2000:21). There is much to be gained, then, by drawing on the insights of both feminist and broader social theory to investigate gender both as an exemplar of broader social processes and also as an important structuring aspect of the lives of individuals in society.

### **Gender in Web 2.0 networked social media – The findings so far**

In countering claims that online media are postmodernist “identity workshops” and critiquing a “vision of bodily transcendence in cyberspace” (Green 2001:150) researchers have often concentrated on their limitations, and on the continuity of gender inequalities across online spaces (Armentor-Cota 2011). In pointing to the role of authenticity in both limiting and affirming social practices, this thesis offers a more balanced picture of the Internet’s limitations and unique potentials with regard to gender and how differing site features interact with these. The previous chapter has showed how conceptions of authenticity and the self emerge differently from

different sites depending on their purpose and the degree of control and compartmentalisation of the audience they offer. These aspects affect the potentials they offer for reflexive self-development and for gender.

On merged audience sites, there is little room for gender ambiguity, experimentation or identity play, and there is a strong expectation that users maintain a congruence of self-presentation and of public image across contexts. The merged audience provokes reflection upon the links between self and social contexts, but the result of this reflection is a reaffirmation of the authentic self as natural and pre-social. The implications for this view for gender are that on merged audience sites, gender is potentially taken for granted, viewed as a natural part of ‘who a person is’, and tied across offline boundaries to the physical, gendered body (Sessions 2009). However, the persistent individualistic focus on the authentic self as the ‘actor behind the mask’ would seem also to potentially encourage reflection on the distance between the self and cultural narratives, images and discourses of gender.

The findings regarding pseudonymous sites showed that the potentials for identity play, experimentation with gender and reflexive self-development that were the focus of early studies still persist within contemporary online media. That this is enabled by the ability to compartmentalise interaction from other contexts and conceal the physical body, seems partly to affirm the idea that being able to disrupt the ‘falsely naturalised links’ of gender identity and gender performance has liberatory potentials. Control over ‘who sees what’ emerged as of particular importance in enhancing feelings of privacy and safety for women and LGBT people. However, as many other researchers have found, requirements of authenticity heavily regulate this- site users prefer to know the gender of others, the body is still an implied referent of online gender, and congruence of offline and online gender presentation is still considered ideal and authentic (Boler 2007; Kendall 2002).

Foregrounding authenticity’s role in regulating gender and its presentation gives insight into how online interaction can still involve reflexive self-development and experimentation with gender in a situation where the body remains the “final

signifier of what is accepted as 'real' and 'true' ” (Boler 2007:153). Boler’s statement that “the mythologies of anonymity and fluidity appear to have their limits: users require that the other offers 'essential' data about their 'real life identity so that sense can be made of textual utterances” (2007:153) is accurate with respect to the findings across both types of sites.

However, researchers have tended to understate that there is genuine liberating space between the limitations set by the criteria of authenticity. Authenticity does the job not only of setting limits on what is ethically acceptable as authentic experimentation, but serves as a narrative norm that can be used to ‘validate’ and affirm identity play as an aspect of ‘authentic’ self-development. Online gender, and online interaction, are neither detached nor ‘disembodied’ (Bakardjieva 2005; Baym 2000; Green 2001; Van Doorn 2011), but neither are the configurations of gender possible within online spaces dismissible as mere continuations of offline possibilities. There are genuine potentials for self-development and the affirmation and development of gender identity online, in part contingent on the ability to compartmentalise contexts and control ‘who sees what’.

We have seen that authenticity plays an important role on pseudonymous and merged audience sites in serving as a means of affirming individuality, but that it also has a role in encouraging a critical attitude towards drawing upon cultural material, images and narratives in self-presentation. Previous chapters have shown that site users, especially on merged audience sites, view it as ‘inauthentic’ to consciously construct a self-presentation in keeping with cultural material such as cultural images and narratives, particularly where such material represents cultural ‘norms’ or ideals. The criteria of authenticity seems on the one hand a potential ‘naturalising’ influence, in encouraging a view of identity as naturally emergent, but also seems to serve as a potential grounds for resisting and critiquing normative ideas of gender.

The chapter on taste and image, however, showed how that site users tend to describe gender differentiation in terms of taste differences. The situation of gender within rhetorics of consumer choice and at the level of 'image' is both reflected and critiqued

within networked social media users' conceptions of authentic self-presentation. A question to pose, with respect to this, is what position gender, masculinities and femininities have with regards to cultural images and narratives, as well as to what extent the critical ambivalence displayed by users regarding cultural narratives and images extends towards gender and its performance. The proceeding sections of this chapter will examine these aspects, firstly by looking at the ways in which site users attribute gender to others in interaction and conceive of gender, masculinities and femininities.

### **Gender attribution**

Gender is something that people 'feel', and identify with, something which they 'do' (Butler 1990), as they perform gender in interaction, and something they 'do' to others and have done to them in interaction, through processes of gender attribution (Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). Looking at how various aspects of these dialectical processes interact is key to understanding gender as identity and process.

The process of attributing gender to others, described by Kessler and McKenna (1978, 2006) as the 'gender attribution process' is one which is potentially disrupted in online interaction where there are no longer easily readable visual or vocal cues as to gender. This ambiguity potentially encourages reflexivity about gender because- "it is only when that deceptively easy process of allocation is interrupted- either because of a process of reflection or because of a potential ambiguity in what we are assessing- that we become conscious of the process of making a judgment" (Harrison and Hood-Williams 2007:18; Kessler and McKenna 1978).

In order to investigate the gender attribution process, as well as give insight into conceptions of masculinity and femininity, interviewees were questioned as to what they might use, in a situation where they couldn't necessarily rely on cues of photographs or names, to determine an Internet user's gender. This question was asked of users of both merged audience and pseudonymous sites, but introduces an

artificial ambiguity in the case of merged audience sites, which usually leave little doubt as to site users' gender. Answers were nonetheless illuminative of broad notions of differences and similarities in gendered presentations. Interviewees were also asked if they felt their own self-presentation online would be easily read as gendered. Gender can be a difficult concept to encourage reflection upon without invoking over-simplistic notions of difference (Ingraham 2006). However, though these questions focused on difference, they also proved useful in getting interviewees to reflect upon similarities and overlaps.

As mentioned in the chapter on taste and image, the most common way in which gender was described as being visible was via differences of taste, for example in aesthetics, films, or other fictional material. June's response here is typical, combining the reference to tastes and interests, "I would probably look at the movies, books, music, the list of likes...lots of sports or politics would make me think it might be a guy." This is partly a reflection of the strong focus on aspects of taste on networked social media, but also reflects broader social tendencies towards framing identity in terms of consumer choices and cultural images.

Some pointed towards differences in visual presentation. Amanda described perceived differences in MySpace profile layouts:

"I suppose some girls would go with flashy or attractive layouts, and boys would go for something more utilitarian or serious. Again, probably a broad generalisation."

Others claimed differences in profile photograph use, claiming, for example, that women would be more likely to focus on appearance and dress, while men would pose themselves more actively. For example, Margaret stated, discussing Facebook photos:

"men's photos are like 'this is a photo of me doing something'... Whereas lots of women's photos tend to be like, not necessarily really overtly sexual but there is that aspect of performance."

Kevin also suggested that on Facebook, men show “their whole body doing something, whereas a woman’s is the top quarter.” As was shown in the image chapter, these claims are in contrast with interviewees’ descriptions of their own profile photographs.

Other than tastes, the most frequent claims mentioned were differences in communication style. Chris, a 20 year old tech support worker from the US, suggested:

“Certain choices of phrase or ways of speaking are more "masculine" or "feminine" than others... I'd be willing to posit that men are more likely to be self-aggrandising in text, and to speak bluntly or directly; women are probably more prone to complimenting others and speaking around issues.”

Sandra, a 19 year old from Hawaii, described men as more ‘confident’ and less ‘attention seeking’ as well as speaking in shorter sentences:

“When you're talking to a guy, they feel a little more like they're comfortable in their skin--more confident... Also, they don't usually make a grab for the spotlight--that is, they try to turn the conversation towards them less often than girls do. Girls are more likely to get emotional more quickly.”

As Sandra’s comment suggests, there was some tendency for women to be described as more ‘attention seeking’, as well as more orientated towards getting emotional support from others, reflecting tendencies for women to be disproportionately criticised as ‘narcissistically’ attention seeking in their self-presentation (Marwick 2011; Sessions 2009). This links to cultural tendencies to be more critical towards women than men when their behaviour is seen to be focused on themselves.

Others mentioned more specific differences of text use, such as in Ben’s statement that “some girls would put little hearts after their status updates”. James, a 23 year old student, commented that “women are much more likely to make regular use of emoticons than men.” Overall these broadly followed notions that men’s communication was more direct, more joking, more matter of fact and more competitive whereas women’s communication was more emotionally expressive, supportive, indirect and more considerate.

Two interviewees pointed towards the potential for gay men to perform ‘femininity’- Kasper, a 23 year old Polish student commented “some gay guys write a bit like girls, yeah, to me sometimes”. This shows these stylistic signs can be seen as connoting not necessarily a person’s gender in itself, but dominant ideas of masculinity or femininity. Rather than reaffirming gendered norms, LGBT interviewees, including transgender interviewees, were less likely to make claims as to substantive gender differences, likely due to their own experiences of having been subjected to gendered norms they felt were restrictive to their expression of their identity.

### **Signifying gender**

This PhD takes the view that it is important to look at site users’ own conceptions and applications of concepts such as gender, masculinities and femininities, to examine how these concepts are actually used and applied in interaction. This also involves looking at how images, discourses and narratives of gender are invoked and discussed when discussing and conceptualising masculinities and femininities.

Several elements of site users’ conceptions of gender can be identified. Firstly, due to a recognition of overlaps and similarities of ways of behaving and presenting the self between men and women, site users were notably tentative about attributing gender. Prefacing their statements about gender difference with comments like "I couldn't be sure", “but that’s probably a gross generalisation” or “there’s only so far you can go with that” was common.

June commented on how her ‘expectations’ of gendered difference were contradicted by her experiences, stating that there are more similarities than differences and continuing:

“I have male friends who post a lot about their kids, photos, updates on their development, etc, which is more typically "female" posting behavior I guess.

Then I have women who post a lot of news articles or sarcastic comments, which one might think would be more typical male posting behavior.”

Interviewees' responses were careful to position themselves discursively in a position of only partial acceptance of the validity of the normative conceptions of gender they were drawing upon, and often invoked ideas of norms in order to partly or wholly counter them, as in the above example. This shows the importance of cultural discourses of individual choice and variation, as well as the influence of feminist discourses which have to some degree challenged the notion that gender difference is deeply embodied and natural. It also reflects that many of the ways in which gendered social meaning is conveyed is via 'image' like sets of connotations, with many ambiguities and overlaps. Thus, site users found that few signs were clear-cut signifiers of gender.

However, it is notable that while they acknowledged potential for variability in self-presentation, conceptions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity (Connell 1987) predominated as reference points for their descriptions of gendered self-presentation. In this, there was often interplay between affirming and questioning the dominant conceptions of gender, using hegemonic concepts as reference points for positioning themselves and voicing their own views. Because of these blurred boundaries between masculine and feminine tastes or masculine and feminine communication style, only the most extremely gendered aspects of taste and self-presentation were discussed as good indicators of gender, often at the level of 'stereotypes'. Thus, things were usually only described as gendered at all where they had recognisable associations with hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. Discussion of gender mostly concentrated on the 'hot pink' and the 'bright blue' of gender, leaving out the subtle variations in-between.

Rather than conceiving of gender in straightforwardly essentialist terms, interviewees often considered gender in terms of superficial differences, linked through signifying chains of association with conceptions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' which are in alignment with hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. For example,



women's implied greater taste for romantic, emotional films and art, their less direct, less confident and more considerate and emotive conversational style, and their consideration for their physical attractiveness, have links with emphasised femininity. Conversely, men's implied greater preference for films, art and photography that are 'serious' action-orientated and often violent, their supposedly more straightforward, confident and direct communication style, and their concentration on avoiding femininity have links to cultural conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. This seems to reflect a predominance of engagement with gender at the level of cultural images, but these images are linked by signifying chains to broader normative narratives and discourses which together make up the hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The connections claimed between these linked elements were posited to link to and signify the gender of individuals, but this connection was not entirely deterministic.

The difference of emoticon use, for example, was used as indicative of a gendered difference on a stylistic level. This is implicitly connected to a notion of women as more emotional and expressive, which aligns with narratives and discourses of emphasised femininity, though importantly, interviewees seldom made *direct* claims about women as having these traits. These were seen to *potentially* signify a person's gender, but there was a continued acknowledgement that there could be a lack of connection between a person's gender identity and the display in public image of these apparent stylised markers of gendered difference.

An interesting aspect of this formulation is that while say, being a man, is seen as not necessarily leading to a communication style or a set of tastes that are unequivocally associated with hegemonic masculinity- gender itself was seldom described without implicit reference to hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.

This formulation nonetheless overall seems to allow for a degree of choice and individualism, as individuals were seen to be to some degree free to express or not to express behaviours and stylistic aspects considered to fit their gender identity. While they drew upon dominant conceptions of gender in framing how others presented

gender, they did not view others as universally adhering to them. There was also no negative judgement made of the idea of not displaying a 'gender appropriate' image.

However a question here is to what degree site users see gender as something consciously 'done', and to what degree they feel expected to 'do gender' and signify masculinity and femininity in their self-presentation and interaction. Since authenticity has a dual potential role in potentially both naturalising discourses and conceptions of gender and serving as a means of reflexive resistance, this also involves questioning the relationship between authenticity and gender.

As the below sections will elaborate, interviewees varied in how consciously they saw others as presenting themselves in gendered ways. Notably, those who gave an account of the reasons why they felt others presented themselves in gendered ways, consciously or unconsciously, tended to be those who described having been made conscious themselves of a mismatch between others' gendered expectations of them and their own personal image and identifications, and were often familiar with feminist and sociologically influenced critiques of normative conceptions of gender. While consciously attempting to meet cultural images and narratives is generally seen as 'inauthentic', with respect to gender it was considered to some degree to be acceptable as an expression of authentic gender identity. To be conscious of gender was here linked to more agency, and indeed to potential resistance as well as self-development with respect to gender. Some described performing gender as partly unconscious, with feminist influenced critiques in particular framing gendered performance as a kind of unconscious conformity.

While gender was discussed with both pseudonymous and merged audience site users, the taken for granted attitude taken towards gender on merged audience sites meant that there tended to be less discussion of being 'conscious' of gender on merged audience sites. In discussing how conscious they and others were of gender, interviewees usually referenced experiences in pseudonymous online contexts where gender could be concealed or revealed, rather than on merged audience sites, where a person's gender is more immediately obvious. Because pseudonymous spaces

introduce a certain amount of ambiguity as to others' gender, and involve interaction with those not known offline, they seem to provoke more reflection upon the difference it makes when gender is revealed or concealed.

### **Consciousness of gender**

Some interviewees stressed that gender was an important aspect of identity which individuals consciously displayed through self-presentation. Such interviewees were often younger people, whose framings of gender reflected individualistic discourses of identity as involving conscious choice, and showed familiarity with discourses and critiques of normative conceptions of gender.

Jennifer posited that what she termed 'gender rules' of masculinity and femininity, were something which people observed consciously:

“[I'm] thinking that gender dictates how people act in life, so if they subscribe to gendered rules they will act that way online as well. And that's everyone... because even people who are transitioning genders, act the gender they're transitioning to.”

She puts a focus on both individual choice and the role of the perceived audience here, in that the audience's perception is conceived of as motivating behaviour and self-presentation, as well as adherence to 'rules of gender':

“I think people act the way they believe they want to be perceived. But, that's not true with everyone.”

She considered gender one of several aspects of identity which were “difficult to separate” and “dictate how a person acts”. In keeping with the centred, substantialist view of the self held by many interviewees, the conception here is of a coherent whole identity, with gender acting as a structuring influence but not one that entirely defines a person's actions.

Importantly, interviewees also stressed that there was an element of choice going on

as to whether to meet or not meet these norms, and often allowed for the potential of a conscious choice to *avoid* portraying themselves in gendered ways. Ben, for example, suggested that the level to which people's gender was important to them was reflected in how much they sought both to show and also to *obscure* their gender online in pseudonymous contexts:

“I do think it's kind of interesting how some people will go out of their way to emphasise their gender, and some people will go to great lengths to mask it... I think it matters a lot to some people. I think it's about identity. Like you sometimes see guys who talk a lot about behaving like a "man"; it's clearly an important part of their identities. [The forum I use] is kind of interesting in that regard because there are a number of transgender users, and for them it's often quite important that they emphasise their identified gender, to the point of sometimes appearing hyper-masculine or feminine... Whereas for those who it doesn't matter to, they'll tend to casually volunteer the information if asked, and otherwise not bring it up.”

The degree to which gender is important to a person's identity is seen as reflected here in how much there is a conscious choice taken to show or obscure it. Robert gave another example of variation in the display of gender and how the motivations for showing gender varied in differing pseudonymous contexts:

“I know that a lot of people who identify as female sign up as male for WOW because they do not want harassment. But at the same time, I know female artists who make a point to say "I AM FEMALE" because apparently they are not doing gender well enough to be read as female.”

Interestingly, those who viewed gendered self-presentation as a conscious choice were often reluctant to describe *themselves* as consciously making the choice to adhere to dominant conceptions of gender. This suggests that despite their stress upon others' gender presentation as a matter of personal choice, they still felt on a personal level that there was something less authentic about a purposeful choice to adhere to normative ideas of gender. For example, Ben's experiences of gender caused him to actively wish to avoid identifying himself online as a particular gender, due to irritation at the importance others placed upon knowing his gender, which he felt said nothing about who he was as a person. He aimed to present himself in a neutral manner- “lately I've usually chosen gender ambiguous usernames

on websites, because I don't think it should matter.”

This shows the ways in which the audience’s interpretation of self-presentation in gendered ways on pseudonymous sites can encourage differing self-presentational practices, showing that feelings of being judged regarding gender can increase a desire for some to sidestep the gendering process, while encouraging others to consciously present their gender according to normative conceptions of gender. In the cases discussed here, whether it involved a conscious attempt to present a gendered image, or to avoid it, action was described as being taken to preserve a congruence of self image, desired image and public image. Yet unlike with other forms of cultural images and narratives, drawing upon gendered cultural narratives and images- or purposefully avoiding them- was not treated as intrinsically inauthentic.

### **‘You stop asking why’- Unconscious gender**

A different perspective on gender and authenticity was given by those interviewees who saw gender as something which people presented and expressed unconsciously. This framing stresses the impact of cultural aspects of the dialectic between culture and self upon individuals and their agency. Such interviewees varied in age and gender, often drawing upon transgender and feminist critiques of normative concepts of gender.

For example, James suggested:

“I think most people don't think about how they present themselves online, gender-wise. For some people, this results in their gender being very obvious, for some it results in their gender being hard to determine, and for a few it can wind up seeming obvious but ultimately lead you to an incorrect assumption.”

Unlike in previous discussions which valorised unreflexive presentation as more authentic and natural, those who mentioned this had a tendency to view it as problematic, in encouraging an unreflexive continuation of limiting ideas of masculinity and femininity. This lack of awareness was seen as contributing to

processes which obscured individuality and disrupted the authentic congruence of self image and public image. Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity here occupied a similar position to the kinds of idealised cultural narratives and images considered inauthentic to draw upon in self-presentation. Yet importantly, meeting these normative ideas was seen as problematic because it is *unconscious* and *unreflexive* rather than because it represents a conscious effort at giving a false impression.

A few interviewees also saw gender 'bias' or prejudice towards others as being largely unconscious. James for example, stated:

"I think everyone is [a little biased], just from being raised in a society with a gender binary. For me, I don't treat a person differently or make assumptions about them based on their gender, but I find myself making some assumptions about large groups of men or women."

While also believing conscious choice was involved in gender presentation, Ben similarly made claims that "people often behave differently towards men and women, even just subconsciously."

Natalie, a 32 year old Dutch worker on a cruise ship, was a self identified feminist, and gave an account of gender as a process of internalising cultural rules conveyed during interaction, and to some degree maintained by the threat of censure:

"Every kid's has gone through at least one "why?" phase in their life. Eventually they drive their parents nuts and get told to stop asking questions and watch tv or something. They do stop asking questions, and eventually just start taking things for granted... Everyone starts presenting themselves somehow they have learned from the culture around them.... The everyday things go on autopilot."

Discussing the reasons women present themselves online in feminine ways she said:

"It's expected in general and many women don't think about it... To them it is as normal as the moon and the sun."

She suggested that people only became conscious of gender when “worrying that you are performing your assigned gender”. She cited examples of how she’d been subjected to negative sanctions regarding her appearance- for example regarding shaving her legs or wearing certain clothing- that made her realise she was stepping outside the bounds of accepted femininity. She felt that this pressure was “less strong than it feels like” but that “if you refuse to participate it makes things harder and you quickly become an outsider.”

The theory echoes second wave feminism’s concern with raising awareness and consciousness of gender, and with interrogating unequal expectations of conformity to gender norms, particularly those of appearance. Natalie’s theory thus downplays the extent to which agency is typically involved in processes of performing gender, and broadly negatively frames gender as unreflexive conformity to expected norms. Her framing of gender as involving the unconscious internalisation of habituated ways of acting based on gender norms has some aspects in common with Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of ‘habitus’. Feminist theories like these have been criticised in later feminist theory for not taking into account the role of agency and for portraying people as unreflexive cultural dupes (McNay 2000).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that expectations that individuals broadly act in ways in keeping with dominant ideas of masculinities and femininities can exert social pressure on individuals. There is an imperative aspect to gender, and there are of course still potential social consequences to failing to meet gendered expectations. West and Zimmerman’s influential work theorised that gender is something ‘done’ in interaction, but also stressed that ‘doing gender’ is motivated by feelings of ‘accountability’ to gendered norms (1987).

As suggested by Natalie’s account, gendered expectations and norms can not only feel like something it is necessary to be ‘accountable’ to, but, as Hollander posits, are part of how gender is ‘enforced’: “People hold each other—and themselves—responsible for their accomplishment of gender by implementing interactional consequences for conformity or nonconformity” (2013:13). Gender is hence not just

‘done’, but it is also something which is ‘done’ to a person by others in interaction. Some social contexts may be experienced as exerting more pressure to meet gendered norms than others, and this is a reason why pseudonymous sites- which allow for more control and compartmentalisation of audiences- tend to give greater leeway to experiment with gendered self-presentation.

As with other aspects of identity, gender can become habituated and incorporated deep into a person’s self image and within their personal narratives of themselves. Partly because of these habituated aspects of gender, most site users did not describe themselves as often being conscious of their own gender. It is notable that those who engaged in discussion of how conscious others were of presenting gender, tended to be those who had been made most conscious of their *own* gender through recognition of mismatches between themselves and their identities and the gendered expectations imposed upon them by others. Such consciousness, and its disruption of aspects of personal image, seem to motivate a more critical and conscious engagement with normative ideas of gender.

Transgender site users, those who had experimented with gendered presentation online, and women in male dominated online contexts described being most conscious of their gender online due to the reactions they received from their online audiences. What linked these exceptions, as we shall see, was that they placed individuals in situations where they felt conscious of a mismatch between others’ expectations or treatment of them based upon their gender, and their own self image or gender identity. Discussion again often centred around experiences on pseudonymous sites, because the gender ambiguity of these contexts can disrupt gender attribution processes, and provide the potential for experiencing being perceived as another gender. This makes it more obvious when assumptions are being made about someone’s gender based on their behaviour or self-presentation.

The proceeding sections will examine moments at which people felt gendered expectations, discrimination or differential treatment heightened their consciousness of gender and disrupted the authentic congruence of their self image, desired image



and public image. That disruptions of personal authenticity play a role in raising awareness of gender shows the reflexive potentials of authenticity in provoking a questioning attitude towards normative conceptions of gender, as well as potentially encouraging a naturalisation of gender norms. This gives insight into the processes behind gender's 'durable' yet 'mutable' qualities in contemporary society, in investigating the extent to which individuals feel 'accountable' to present a 'gender appropriate' image.

### **Experiencing gender**

Transgender interviewees, as well as interviewees who had experimented with gender presentation online, described themselves as having become more conscious and aware of gendering processes due to their experiences of being treated differently according to what gender they were perceived as being. Often this led to a critical framing of gender and attendant norms of masculinity and femininity as false assumptions of difference 'imposed' from the outside, due to their disruption of the congruence of personal image.

James was reflective about the differences he'd noticed between how he was treated offline and online, and by those who knew he was transgender and those who did not:

"I'm biologically female, identify as male, but haven't gotten to a point in my life where I'm able to transition. People who see me assume I'm a tomboy, but people who talk to me online don't have the visual information to make that assumption. It's amazing the difference between how people talk to a tomboy and how people talk to a guy."

Online, he was free to be perceived as male without his physical appearance causing him to be misgendered by others, allowing for the validation of his gender identity and a greater congruence of aspects of personal image. However, he also felt that some people who found out he was transgender had a tendency to treat him as if he was a woman:

“Most people didn't change how they treated me but I watched a few people morph from treating me as they did the male members of the community to how they did the female ones. Their language became a bit more formal, they didn't share jokes with me as often. They were also a lot more forgiving if my behavior was odd or out of line.”

While he found this frustrating as a reflection that they were not reacting to him as they would to a cisgender man, he found it “less a shame that they treated me like a woman and more that they treated women differently to begin with.”

Transgender site users were striving for a validation of their gender identities, and to aid in this, they did describe themselves as consciously drawing upon images and stylistic elements with connotative links to hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. For example James described himself as having intentionally stopped using emoticons in his text to encourage others to gender him as male. However, their consciousness of being subject to what they felt were false gendered assumptions often caused them to be critical of the idea of masculinity and femininity as a natural reflection of gender difference. Thus, pursuit of an authentic congruence of aspects of personal image could motivate reaffirming gender norms by conscious adherence to them, but this example also shows how disruption of this congruence between aspects of personal image can prompt critical reflection upon norms, and indeed resistance to them.

### **‘No girls on the Internet’- experiences of sexism**

Experiencing sexism and differential treatment is an obvious way in which women are made to feel uncomfortably conscious of gender online or elsewhere (Hausman 1999). Notably, it was those women who described interacting in particularly male dominated environments online who were particularly keenly aware of being treated as different from the norm, with several interviewees mentioning experiences of male dominated gaming contexts.

Emma commented:

“Most of the players there are male, so when you say "I'm a 21 year old married female" sometimes people act like they've found a unicorn.”

She felt male gamers censored themselves somewhat around her at first- “my gender does make them a little more hesitant to be crass around me”. However she felt that in time they grew to treat her similarly to men:

“At first some of the younger boys are a little wary of me, but once they see that I'm not going to be grossed out by fart humor and in fact enjoy it, they stop caring that I'm a girl.”

Fitting in with their humour style and defying their expectations that she act differently as a “girl” led to them no longer treating her differently. As in Kendall’s study of MUDs, community members “cast women as outsiders unless and until they prove themselves able to perform masculinities according to the social norms of the group” (2002:100).

Natalie had a more negative framing of her experiences of male dominated communities:

“At one point or another they make an issue about my femaleness. Either you become a mascot and they are incredibly proud to have you. Or you get flirting, harassment, personal messages, or they make fun of you behind your back.”

She felt it was impossible for her to become perceived like everyone else if she identified herself as female, and avoiding it was the only way to be treated on the basis of individual qualities- “as a male or neutral identified gamer you are just another gamer and your skills and conduct matter.” For her, the experience of being gendered online had become inseparable from the process of being treated differently in problematic ways.

In circumstances where conceptions of gendered difference disrupt personal authenticity and result in differential treatment and a consciousness of being ‘different’, individuals can feel gender as something ‘done to them’ and as an impingement on their authentic expression. While Emma had restabilised her

feelings of personal authenticity by being treated as 'one of the guys', Natalie felt excluded from the possibility of achieving a congruence of personal image so long as she was seen as female, due to site users' imposition of gendered expectations upon her. It is significant that this was especially heightened in online spaces where men predominated, which in cyclical ways serve to create a culture which excludes and marginalises women. James suggested "the more mixed-gender a community is, the less the members tend to judge based on gender." Many of the early studies of online interaction which found high levels of sexism took place in online spaces where men predominated. A positive effect of growing gender equality in terms of Internet access has been that there are more alternatives for women.

### **Masculinity as limitation?**

Whereas women described being limited by the attitudes of others who would treat them in sexist or generally 'othering' ways online because of their gender, gendered expectations were seen as limiting men in a different way. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some interviewees depicted the requirement to meet ideals of 'masculinity' as a limiting, restrictive factor in men's self-presentation and action in general.

Amanda suggested:

"I think men are a bit more worried about image than women. As in how they appear to their mates."

Other interviewees suggested that men had to be more careful about how they appeared to others because of the particular social consequences of failing to meet hegemonic masculinity. Eduard, who felt heavily limited by expectations of masculinity, commented:

"Have you ever heard what people say about men who care about their appearance? "He is so vain, he must be a fag" about men who enjoy dancing or art or ballet or just enjoy beauty? "No real man enjoys this."

One response to these feelings of limitation was represented by the example of the cisgender men in the previous chapter, who found presenting themselves as female in the virtual world Second Life to be a way to explore repressed aspects of themselves. Butler's work raises the issue of the 'cost' of gendered identifications- the ways in which the binary, polarised nature of hegemonic constructions of what it means to be a man or a woman involve a suppression of other possibilities, which can create 'melancholia' (1993). The 'loss' of possibilities outside of the masculine, and the suppression involved in striving for an approximation of gendered norms of masculinity, causes for these men a conflict and a feeling of incompleteness which is restored by this 'gender masquerade'. Through masquerade as a woman, they are performing gender in a way which frees them from the accountability they feel to masculinity, and restores an authentic congruence of personal image.

That to escape the requirements of masculinity and experiment with gender requires actually changing over to a virtual female form is a reflection of the difficulties of escaping the dualistic construction of gender as a binary. Both women who obscure their gender online to avoid discrimination and harassment and men who use female avatars to express themselves online are achieving liberation through implicitly or explicitly occupying another side of a gender binary. Kendall's comment that researchers who stress the fluidity of online gender "confuse gender malleability with limited gender exchangeability" (Kendall 2002:222) is to some degree reflected here.

In the case of men who represent themselves with female avatars, many may in fact play a part in reinscribing dominant conceptions of gender in offloading the 'feminine' aspects of their personalities onto an avatar who will be perceived by others as female. Another potentially problematic aspect of this is that men may exaggerate gendered aspects in attempting to 'pass' as female, and often present them in overtly sexualised ways- as what Eduard called "a caricature of a woman" (Kendall 2002; Nakamura 2002). This re-sorts aspects of themselves into gender appropriate forms and preserves an inaccurate, surface level appearance of a connection between gender identity and gender performance which is belied by the reality of their gender identities. The positive benefit of this for them in allowing

them to feel a greater, more authentic congruence of personal image, informing their gender identities and encouraging them to interrogate gendered assumptions, is considerable, but there are some negative potential consequences to the practice of men using female avatars in this way. Nakamura (2002) and Boler (2007) point to the potentially regressive consequences of 'identity tourism' where the 'curious tourist' engages in identity play as another race or gender in a way that reproduces shallow stereotypes.

Kendall insightfully suggests that the pseudonymous online context "enables both the masqueraders and their audiences to interpret these performances in ways that distance them from a critique of 'real' gender" (Kendall 2002:107). However, unlike participants in her research, interviewees who engaged in 'gender masquerade' did critique 'real gender', and felt that their experiences had had a transformative effect on their own conceptions of gender and upon their gender identities. This was because experimenting with gender presentation gave them a greater feeling of personal authenticity, while also exposing them to some of the different ways in which those of a different gender are treated.

Overall, the above examples show how gendering processes interact with personal image and conceptions of authenticity, as disruptions of the 'authentic' congruence of internal and external aspects of personal image by gendered assumptions provoke a mix of adherence to and criticism of normative concepts of gender. In all cases, gendered expectations were seen as to some degree limiting potentials and disrupting the potential for authentic expression, complicating the authentic congruence of self image, desired image and public image. However, the strategies taken in response to this disruption to restabilise the congruence varied, and were limited in scope by the predominance of dominant narratives and discourses of gender. Transgender site users partly engaged in modifying their public image to fit normative ideas and expectations, but their experiences of gendered treatment provoked a critical attitude towards gender which made them cautious about essentialising normative ideas of gender. Both some women who were subject to differential treatment due to their gender, and some men who felt limited by hegemonic masculinity, moved to

reestablish the disruptions caused by this by presenting themselves as a different gender. In this case of cisgender site users, this strategy can help to preserve a greater congruence of personal image, but provides a misleading outer appearance of congruence between gender identity and gender presentation. This shows the dual role of authenticity in serving as a motivation to adhere to gender norms to preserve a congruence of personal image, potentially reifying and falsely naturalising dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as highlighting its role in provoking a critical approach towards normative ideas of gender.

### **“We’re all people”- resisting gender norms**

Among those who shared accounts of being ‘gendered’ by others and experiencing a disruption of personal authenticity due to gendered expectations, there was evidence of some desire to escape the limitations of the social meanings and expectations attached to gender categories.

Site users who took a critical approach to gender often made a distinction between gender as what Jenkins calls a ‘nominal’ self identification and what I term a ‘substantive’ one (2008). That is, between identifying with a particular gender, and identifying with masculinities and femininities, and other social meanings attached to gender. This distinction is described within transgender discourse as a distinction between gender identity and gender expression (GLAAD 2014).

Importantly, instead of inventing new ways to be masculine or feminine, those who critiqued ideas of gender tended to challenge the idea that men had to be masculine or women had to be feminine, leaving the actual dominant conceptions of masculinities and femininities intact and capable of conscious deployment in self-presentation.

Robert stated:

“Gender for me isn't the defining characteristic of a person. Does gender tell

me what kind of movies someone likes, if they read, where they hope to be in ten years, or how I should interact with them? Nope. That depends on the person.”

He made a claim for the importance of the individual above all else, continuing:

“We all have our cultural upbringing and expectations that rub off on us. But...well, I see gender and race in a similar light. Yes, they can shape who we are, but in the end, we are all people, and that is what matters most.”

James expressed a common sentiment that people overstated the significance of gender- though he also underlined the cultural importance of gender and the difficulties of avoiding ‘bias’:

“I think attaching any significance to the gender someone is online is too much, but it's not realistic to expect people to hold no gender bias.”

Feminist, transgender, and ‘queer’ narratives and discourses, as well as the narrative norm of authenticity and of the individualistic, pre-social self, can serve as a means of critiquing gendered expectations and providing grounds for reflexivity and resistance, as well as self-affirmation and identity development. The importance of the Internet as a means for finding audiences supportive of a greater range of presentations of gender, and for giving access to discourses and narratives which challenge the dominant conceptions of gender, was reflected throughout the accounts given by many interviewees. Robert commented:

“Would I even know "gay" could be real if it weren't for the Internet? Probably not. Just having the information available is liberating. Knowledge is power, and all that. Plus, even if most websites have the M/F box, no one is going to hunt you down to make sure it is ‘right.’“

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has described the ways in which masculinity and femininity were conceived of and experienced by interviewees, dealing with gender as something which is ‘felt’ and identified with, something which is performed in interaction



through display in public image, and something which is ‘done to’ others in interaction. It has shown how authenticity interacts with personal image to motivate and raise consciousness of gendered behaviour, and forms part of how individuals experience gendering processes.

This concluding section will examine the implications of the findings for theorisations of masculinities and femininities, outlining the ways in which these fit amongst conceptions of gender as involving performance, image and narrative. It will conclude with a theorisation of gender that goes beyond seeing it as merely ‘performance’ and takes into account the multi-faceted, ‘mutable but durable’ qualities of contemporary gender and the means for its reproduction and resistance.

### **Masculinities and Femininities**

Masculinities and femininities consist of collections of cultural narratives, discourses and images which link ways of being, acting and presenting the self with gender categories, infused with an ideological, imperative aspect. These constitute the culturally dependent social meanings attached to gender. Several aspects of masculinities and femininities have been investigated in the research. Firstly, the research findings emphasise the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity to framings of gender. Site users acknowledged that few fit the ‘dark blues and hot pinks’ of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, yet at the same time, it seemed impossible for them to speak of gender without using them as a reference point. It is important to recognise that behaviour which falls outside of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity may be defined not as another kind of ‘doing gender’ but as not ‘doing gender’ at all (Hollander 2013; Risman 2009).

Connell’s influential conceptualisation of gender is useful in theorising that multiple masculinities and femininities exist in relationships of power. However, the findings show that care should be taken when defining multiple masculinities and femininities to avoid creating “a tautology: whatever groups of boys and girls, or men and women

do is a kind of gender” (Risman 2009:81). Redefining, for example, Ben’s conscious efforts to avoid showing gender, or Natalie’s rejection of the performance of emphasised femininity as new kinds of subordinate masculinities and femininities would seem to miss that they are attempts to *avoid* ‘doing gender’ and ‘being gendered’ (Risman 2009). Only groups of ideological narratives and discourses about what men and women are and ought to be should be termed masculinities and femininities. ‘Subordinate’ forms of femininities and masculinities should only be considered such where they meet this criteria, rather than being used as a catch-all term for any kinds of presentation done by men and women outside the bounds of dominant conceptions.

Another important point is that in their role as reference points for describing and conceptualising gender, hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity tended to be referenced indirectly rather than directly. They were part of a loose chain of signifiers between surface level stylistic differences at the level of image, masculinity and femininity, a person’s gender, and the physical body. A person’s tastes, use of language, and visual self-presentation were treated as gendered signs which could signify a person’s gender, if they had associations with discourses and narratives of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. In turn, a person’s gender as signified online via these aspects was implied to signify their physical sex.

This chain of signifieds and linkages, however, was somewhat weaker than traditional conceptions of gender which conflate all aspects of these into an unbreakable set of associations. Additionally, interviewees did not *idealise* the conflation of these aspects, despite their general preference for a naturalised conception of the self, which might be assumed to lead to the idealisation of a smooth, conflict free linkage. That gender was seen as signified mostly by image-like, superficial differences reflects the importance of the cultural image and styles and consumer tastes to contemporary notions of social difference. This in itself loosens the imperative, ideological aspects of ideas of gender- as gender is reconfigured in terms that make its display easier to see as an optional ‘choice’. This loosening of the chains of association above accounts for the changeability and

transformability of gender- but it also points towards the endurance of less ‘mutable’ conceptions of difference underneath.

### **Resistance, dis-identification, agency and authenticity**

Between the loosened chains of signifiers, gender still emerges as something with social force which can influence how individuals feel about themselves and their identities, and can result in a disruption of feelings of personal authenticity. As Hollander notes, gendering processes exert pressure to be ‘accountable’ to following expectations: “It is individuals who “do gender,” but they do so in interaction with others, and the normative ideals and expectations that drive their behavior are the local manifestation of the gendered social structure” (2013:24).

Due to this, the critical position taken towards recognisable adherence to cultural narratives, images and discourses was not so uniformly present when discussing gender. In drawing upon dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, interviewees were themselves drawing upon and partly affirming normative cultural images that link with narratives and discourses associated with gender. While they all acknowledged the potential for individual variation, many site users did not take the critical attitude towards representing normative concepts of masculinity and femininity that they took towards other cultural images, narratives and discourses, suggesting they accepted hegemonic conceptions of gender as natural reflections of authentic gender difference.

For those that did frame dominant conceptions of gender as problematic and took a more critical view towards gender, recognition of the ubiquity of gendered norms and hegemonic conceptions of gender meant that they did not simply condemn people for acting and presenting themselves in accordance with them. Site users’ recognition that people are, to varying degrees, made accountable to following dominant conceptions of gender, meant that unlike with other cultural narratives and discourses, making a conscious choice- to present or not present the self in accordance with normative ideas of gender- was associated with more rather than

less authenticity. Genders' perceived imposition 'from the outside' through gendering processes in interaction leads to the idea that adherence to gendered norms is understandable, but that gender ideally ought to be something engaged with consciously and as a choice, rather than something merely followed out of obligation. Individualistic conceptions of the authentic self as having an 'essential core', apart from social obligations and the expectations and demands of others, were drawn upon here in countering dominant ideas of gender and prioritising individual agency.

The prevalence of an individualistic view of authenticity as avoiding conformity to cultural narratives, images and discourses means that for some, expectations of following normative ideas of gender can be experienced as an impingement on personal agency and a disruption of personal authenticity. The desire to restabilise personal authenticity can result in adherence to gendered norms, resulting in a false naturalisation of gender, (Hollander 2013; West and Zimmerman 1987) but it can also result in a critical attitude towards the necessity of meeting them.

Among interviewees, a conscious and critical awareness of gender processes was more common in those who felt their authentic selves were incompatible with normative ideas of gender, and who struggled with obtaining external validation of their personal image and their identities. In such cases, individualistic conceptions of authenticity, as well as feminist and transgender discourses, allowed them to preserve a feeling of authenticity by affirming the essential authenticity of their identities. Those who find their self image does not clash with normative discourses and narratives of gender, and the gendered expectations placed upon them, are likely to be less conscious of gendering processes. This lack of consciousness and conflict is likely to cause them to frame their 'authentic selves' in ways which naturalise normative ideas of gender.

Future research could expand upon the research results and deal in greater detail with looking at what circumstances and contexts, for example, support and encourage people to interrogate and experiment with gender and seek authentic expression, and

which more tightly enforce and place sanctions upon transgressing gender norms and further their naturalisation. A more detailed approach focusing more on individuals' consciousness and development of their gender identity over time, and their narrativisation of this process, would likely illuminate more of the ways in which authenticity works as part of how individuals naturalise dominant conceptions of gender and incorporate them within their identities, as well as how they resist them. This would give greater insight into how best to encourage an interrogative, critical approach to gender. The potential relevance of online contexts to this type of identity development has been shown in this thesis- online contexts can provide validation of gender identities and provide access to narratives and discourses which provide support in countering normative ideas of gender.

It is important to note the possibilities of resisting and critiquing gender are furthered not only by individualistic narratives and discourses of authenticity, but also 'counter narratives' and theorisations that explicitly challenge normative ideas of gender- such as transgender and feminist theory (Hollander 2013). The Internet plays a useful role in providing these, though of course, the Internet can also provide support for regressive attitudes towards gender.

Bamberg notes that 'master narratives', or culturally dominant narratives and discourses, must be invoked in order for them to be countered by opposing counter narratives or discourses, and that there is, in interaction, often a vacillation between affirming and contesting such dominant narratives and discourses which never 'truly' escapes the frame of the dominant discourse (2004). Notably, rather than developing new ideas of masculinity and femininity, site users who critiqued gender did so by making a distinction between gender as a nominal and a substantive identification. They made a distinction between 'gender identity' and 'gender performance', claiming that to 'be a man' need not necessitate fitting ideas of hegemonic masculinity, and that women need not be feminine. The inescapability of referring to dominant conceptions of gender when discussing the concept of gender, even to refute or challenge hegemonic formulations, does seem to reflect this dynamic, as there is not an attempt to remove the framework of hegemonic conceptions altogether so much as to counter their universality and introduce more flexibility in

their interpretation.

### **Defining gender**

Overall, this account gives an explanation of both the image-like superficial focus of framings of contemporary gender, and the partial loosening of the obligatory, oppressive aspects of gender, while showing the remaining significance and impact of dominant conceptions of gender. Through examination of the role of authenticity as a potential naturalising force in essentialising gender, as well as for prompting the interrogation of gender and the reformation of gender-related norms, this account also gives space for theorising how gender is contested, negotiated and reproduced, online and offline.

Gender can be theorised as involving a dialectic between the individual and local social contexts in which they move, and between local and broader culture. The individual comes to understand the self as gendered through interaction with others and identify on a nominal level with their assigned gender category (Jenkins 2008). They come into contact with narratives, discourses and images which teach them about what it means socially to be part of this gender category, and that these set up expectations for how they act and interact (West and Zimmerman 1987). Awareness of the expectations motivates behaviour to meet them as individuals realise they are 'accountable' to normative ideas of gender- but this also can provoke reflection upon the distance between what they feel they are and what they are expected to be. The situation of popular ideas of gendered presentation and behaviour within a narrow range of what might be called 'stereotypical' polarisations of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity both increases the difficulty of meeting norms and increases the likelihood of experiencing points of disidentification with them. Gender becomes something they 'do' and perform in interaction, based on their identification, but emerges also from a process of having gendering done to them in interaction and 'enforced' through sanctions (Hollander 2013).

Gender itself emerges from this formulation as reproduced through the external and

internal interactions between aspects of personal image and the repetition and transformation of cultural narratives and images. This involves dialectics between self image and public image, and between personal and cultural images and narratives. Institutions and the media have their part in producing, reproducing, affirming and also providing grounds for the transformation of discourses, narratives and images of gender (Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Gender can be understood as performative in the sense that it is constituted, reconstituted and negotiated in interaction through gendered ways of acting, moving, talking, speaking and dressing. But performance cannot be all there is to gender. In focusing only on gender as constituted by visible, embodied expression of gender Butler (1991, 1993) understates the extent to which gender informs self perception and experience in less visible, internal, subjective ways. As Nelson suggests, “this causes performativity to remain narrowly focused on subjectification, a privileging of the moment (even if it is repeated over and over) in which discourse encloses or subjugates a person’s identity” (1999:333).

It is difficult to account for agency and resistance via recognition of distance between the self, the social category of gender, and the social meanings attached to these categories if there is no distinction made between gender as a self identification and gender’s expression in interaction. Butler conceptualises the ‘gap’ between the self and the ‘normative phantasms’ (1994) of gender mainly as motivating efforts to perform gender, not as a means of resisting or reforming it (Nelson 1999). Given that recognition of this was an important motivator for critiquing and resisting gender, this is a particularly important oversight.

To account for the ways in which gender, masculinities and femininities are subjectively experienced, and to allow scope for agency, gender identity can be conceptualised as an interface between structure and subjectivity, gender ideology and individual agency. Gender identification can have both a nominal and substantive component, and can be defined as an individual’s working out of their own position amongst a range of discourses, narratives and images of gender,

particularly hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.

It is important to note the role of personal narrative as part of the process by which gender identity is formed via a narrativisation process of placing the self within social structures, cultural narratives and images over time. If identity is acknowledged as produced and transformed over time through narratives, this sidesteps critiques that gender identity requires a view of gender as something fixed or innate (Hausman 1999). It captures that “there is nothing inevitable or fixed about the types of narrative coherence that may emerge from the flux of events. Yet, at the same time, the centrality of narrative to a sense of self suggests that there are powerful constraints or limits to the ways in which identity may be changed” (McNay 2000:80).

It is the sedimented aspects of gender that allow gender differentiations to carry their “virtual vapor trails” (Boler 2007) across to online interaction. As McNay states, “gender identities are not free floating, but involve deep-seated investments on the part of individuals” (2000:18). Additionally, persistent belief in gender differences, persistent sexism and ‘enforcement’ of accountability to dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity via negative sanctions and exclusion, place limits on the transformability of gender, online and off (Boler 2007; Consalvo and Paasonen 2002; Kendall 2000; 2002).

However, this is not to say that online spaces cannot provide some liberatory and unique potentials not present in face-to-face contexts, within the bounds of authenticity. The chains of signifiers that link signs with dominant conceptions of gender may overall structure gender, but between the linkages there is leeway for experimentation and reflexivity. On pseudonymous sites, separating the ‘falsely naturalised’ links between the physical body and the presentation of gender does further loosen these signifying links in allowing for control over the disclosure of gender and for experimentation with gender. Pseudonymous online contexts can also play an important role in providing transgender Internet users in particular with supportive contexts in which to develop and affirm their gender identities. The strong



focus on authenticity both limits the potentials of online gender, but also reflects how authenticity as a norm can serve as a means of questioning and resisting gendered norms, and as a means of affirming processes of identity development.

It is noteworthy also that these possibilities are partly contingent upon a compartmentalised audience, semi-anonymous self-presentation, and the possibility of concealing the physical body, and are more constrained on merged audiences. It is important to avoid conceiving of online environments as offering the opportunity to 'transcend' gender simply because the physical body is not visible (Boler 2007). However, it remains the case that there are differing freedoms and constraints on differing sorts of sites, and that women and LGBT people benefit in particular from having greater control over what they show online and to whom.

“My friend quite literally sat me down at a computer and made my Facebook for me because I was apparently the only one in the world without one. Which is obviously not true, but with how pervasive Facebook is in our culture, even outside of the Internet, it feels that way sometimes.”- Emma

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions**

Web 2.0 networked social media play an increasingly important part in managing our social lives, providing spaces for us to archive our experiences, relationships and feelings, from mundane and trivial day-to-day tribulations to significant life changing moments. The ubiquity of these media has reached the stage that interviewees repeatedly explained why they joined social networking sites such as Facebook in terms of social *obligation* rather than voluntary engagement.

At the start of the research period of this thesis, networked social media were already tightly integrated within everyday life, and fast growing. Change comes at a fast pace in the field of Internet research, and there are some already eager to declare Web 2.0 ‘obsolete’ as Web 3.0 and even Web 4.0 loom on the horizon (Allen 2013). However, in the years it took to complete this research, Web 2.0 networked social media have only become more popular and important as an aspect of contemporary society. While individual sites rise and fall- and several have done so within the period of the research- it seems likely that some form of Web 2.0 networked social media will continue to be a significant factor in our social and cultural lives.

Looking at what this means for identity and self-presentation, and how this affects people’s conceptions of themselves and their lives, has been a core focus of this research. Before moving on to the contributions this research has made, it is helpful to recap key aspects of the ways in which these media are conceived of in popular and academic discourses. This helps to situate the research conclusions within relevant debates and within the rapidly evolving history of the Internet.

What online media are seen to reflect, change and exemplify about our culture has undergone a striking change in the last decade, due to the predominance of Web 2.0

networked social media. Networked social media's integration within everyday social life has made these sites placeholders for anxieties and theorisations about the state of contemporary identity and culture. Gone from centre stage are debates that cast the risks and benefits of the Internet in terms of the postmodern potentials of fleeting, anonymised play, detached from local contexts. Now, the risks and affordances of online interaction are debated in terms of the visibility, identifiability and persistence in time of the data that networked social media encourage us to share about ourselves and our lives (Boyd 2007, 2008; Lievrouw 2012). Instead of exemplifying a postmodern embrace of fluidity and distaste for fixity, many networked social media fix their users within documented and displayed pasts and social networks, with each interaction making an identifiable trace which persists beyond the moment (Boyd 2007, 2008; Hand 2012).

Contemporary online media are framed in popular discourse as encouraging ways of socialising and presenting the self and relating to others which are “increasingly narcissistic, obsessed with self-promotion and visually mediated appearances over the substance of real relationships” (Hand 2012:194; Boyd 2007; Mallan 2009; Paparcharissi 2011). Research has described them as encouraging idealised self representations via self-branding, furthering a ‘commodity culture’ in encouraging users to identify themselves via taste preferences, and share and disseminate commercial content (Hand 2012; Marwick 2005, 2011; Rosen 2012; Scholz 2008; Van Cleemput 2008). These media have been implicated in the tendency for life to be mediated through images in an increasingly ‘visual’ culture, encouraging the “visual publicisation of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape” (Hand 2012:1). They have also been seen to exemplify aspects of the ‘network society’ and ‘information society’ and Bauman’s ‘confessional society’ - a society of ‘big data’ where personal information displayed publicly is an aspect of both social and economic currency (Bauman 2005; Beer 2008; Boyd and Crawford 2012; Hand 2012). While proponents of networked social media stress their ‘participatory’ ‘openness’ and ‘connectedness’, they have been subject to much critique in academia and popular disclosure for reconfiguring the bounds of the public and private and encouraging a mutual ‘lateral surveillance’ (Andrejevic 2005; Albrechtslund 2008;

Hand 2012; Marwick 2011). While these sites are seen to encourage ‘authenticity’ in terms of consistency to offline life, anchoring online performance in the offline, they also have been seen to complicate or even commodify authenticity (Marwick 2005; Leonardi 2009; Sessions 2009). Research into these sites has highlighted the need to consider how these factors are met with, navigated and conceptualised by site users themselves, and how they manage the challenges of merged audiences and reconfigured boundaries (Boyd 2010; Hand 2012; Mallen 2009).

This thesis has contributed to these debates by investigating narrative, image, taste and authenticity as central aspects of how networked social media site users present themselves and conceive of the links between themselves and their mediated representation online. It has identified narrative norms which structure self-presentation and narrativisation, and developed a concept of ‘image’ which accounts for aspects of the links between culture and the ‘authentic self’. Site users’ conceptions of image, narrative, authenticity and gender at a ground level have been connected with macro-level theorisations and developed into theorisations that breach gaps between the two. In taking a comparative approach between media, the research has identified how differing configurations of audience and differing site features encourage particular ways of conceptualising the links between the self and the social, which link to their potentials for self-development. The thesis has attempted to fill gaps in the field, by taking a comparative approach between media, addressing narrative, image, authenticity and gender, and by focusing on a broader range of age groups than much of the previous research.

The thesis has added specificity and nuance to conceptions of the changes from old to new media in highlighting the importance of an often overlooked distinction between ‘merged audience’ and ‘pseudonymous’ media, which both eclipses and underpins many of the claimed distinctions in the potentials of old and new media. The comparative approach taken by the research has highlighted the specific ways in which the merged audience complicates and produces particular ways of conceptualising the ‘authentic self’. This both underscores the transformative importance of the merged audience upon the potentials of online interaction, and the need to take into account the heterogeneity of ‘Web 2.0’, and the continued existence

of pseudonymous media, within and outwith networked social media.

The thesis has also provided useful input in highlighting the important role of authenticity, which is not only an important aspect of the differences between merged audience and pseudonymous sites, but also plays an important role in conceptions of identity and self-presentation. Authenticity has a role in regulating, validating and delegitimizing self-presentation and self-development, and can be a means of both naturalising and critiquing social practices, cultural images and narratives. Rather than embracing the 'egocentric' 'image conscious' elements of networked social media and celebrating the notion of living life publicly for an audience, the research has shown that site users reject them, using an individualistic conception of authenticity as naturally emergent and pre-social. Many of the popular critiques and concerns regarding narcissism, image consciousness and the consequences of 'confessional' society, are present in the critical attitudes of site users themselves towards others' use of these media.

Highlighting the role of authenticity as a motivating factor, a regulatory factor and narrative norm, helps advance an understanding of online interaction which is also relevant to understanding gender online. Looking at the role of authenticity in regulating the bounds of experimentation with gender, and the ways in which differing site types constrain and expand the potentials for gender, helps to go beyond the limitations of past debates about the potentials for online gender. Authenticity also emerged in the research as a means of both reifying and encouraging resistance to normative ideas of gender.

This chapter will elaborate on these contributions and the implications these have for sociological research into online environments at both a methodological and theoretical level. It will identify some enduring problems and questions within social theory and feminist theory and describe how the research contributes to them. It will also elaborate on a theory of identity that attempts to get around shortcomings in contemporary theories of identity by amalgamating conceptual approaches to narrative, image and performance.

## Research implications

- The research has shown the importance of considering the differences between differing online media and their affordances. This also includes an important finding that Web 2.0 networked social media differ depending on whether they have a 'merged audience' or are 'pseudonymous', and that these differences account for many perceived differences between older media and networked social media.
- Relatedly, it has shown the need to recognise the ways in which particular site features- in particular the degree of control over who sees what is presented and shared and how much they allow for anonymity and compartmentalisation- affect the potentials for self-presentation and shape site users' conceptions of identity and authenticity.
- Authenticity online has been shown to be much more than 'authenticity to offline life', as authenticity plays an important role in regulating self-presentation, narratives and images, validating and delegitimizing social practices and the relationships between the self and the social. It serves as a means by which site users validate and position their own identities and their presentation in personal narratives and images, as well as evaluate others and critique social practices.
- Authenticity has also been shown to be an often understated aspect of how site users meet with the privacy and impression management challenges of networked social media. Conceptions of authentic self-presentation as eschewing choice and construction affirm identity and serve as a counter-cultural critique of social practices, yet also can limit agency and complicate the conscious privacy and impression management necessary for the use of merged audience sites.

- The identification of the importance of authenticity, the effects of a merged audience, and the importance of control and compartmentalisation, have implications for debates about privacy and accountability in an Internet context where there are increasing moves to merge audiences and erode potentials for pseudonymity.
- There is a need for recognition that site users' perceptions and experiences of these sites are structured to an extent by cultural discourses and narratives surrounding these sites, and reflect also broader cultural critiques and conceptions. Relatedly, there is a need to consider the extent to which, despite growing integration of the Internet into daily life, site users continue to perceive a divide between online and offline which positions the online as inherently less 'authentic'.
- The research has shown the necessity of examining and accounting for individualistic conceptions of authenticity and of the pre-social self as the 'authentic self' in theories of identity, reflexivity and agency. Conceptions of the authentic self can serve both as points of resistance to social norms and discourses, and as a way of naturalising and essentialising them.
- In theorisation of gender, there is a need to take into account the importance of authenticity, in regulating gender and its performance, as authenticity can serve as a means of both naturalising and encouraging resistance to normative ideas of gender. The research has also stressed the need to take into account the conceptualisations of gender, masculinities and femininities expressed by individuals in their everyday experiences and their attributions of gender online. These include the dominance of a singular, polarised conception of masculinity and femininity which situates gendered difference as a chain of signifieds linking superficial differences of style to more substantive discourses and narratives of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity.

- The research has shown the necessity of the development of a theory of identity which takes into account reflexivity and agency, the role of authenticity, and the performative, image based and narrative aspects of contemporary identity as reflected through the conceptualisations of individuals.

### **The media matters- the importance of site structure**

As mentioned above, the recent history of the Internet is often framed in terms of a change from the anonymity and ambiguity of older, more group orientated media, to the identifiability, fixity and visibility of Web 2.0 networked social media. The normalisation of these media, and of Internet interaction in general, has engineered a “shift in popular discourses and the study of new media from an emphasis on possibility, novelty, adaptability, and openness toward greater preoccupations with risk, conflict, vulnerability, routinization, stability, and control“ (Lievrouw 2012:616).

One important contribution of this research has been its identification of the importance of considering the differences *within* Web 2.0 media, which complicate this picture. Relatedly, the research has stressed the importance of taking into account the influence of site features on the affordances and uses and limitations of these sites. Most research into online media has focused on only one or two types of media. While some have critiqued the usefulness of the term ‘Web 2.0’ (Scholz 2008; Allen 2008, 2013), in concentrating on what’s ‘new’ about Web 2.0 networked social media, many descriptions of networked social media features necessarily have concentrated on the identifiable trends they share. This often ends up downplaying ways in which sites grouped into Web 2.0 networked social media differ from each other, and overlap with older media.

In taking a comparative approach, the research has revealed that whether a site is arranged to have a merged audience or is pseudonymous is more significant in influencing its potentials and affordances for identity and self-presentation than



whether or not the site is within Web 2.0 networked social media or not. This distinction both overlaps and accounts for some of the distinctions between old and new media. Most older media were pseudonymous, and much of what is 'new' about Web 2.0 sites and what they bring to online interaction is that many of them prioritise contact with merged audiences. Many of what are considered Web 2.0 networked social media's differences from older media are in fact more accurately describable in terms of a distinction between pseudonymous and merged audience media. Pseudonymous media still exist within Web 2.0 and have more in common with other pseudonymous media outwith Web 2.0 with regards their potentials and limitations for identity and its presentation, than they do with merged audience networked social media.

Thus, many of the changes identified as aspects of Web 2.0 networked social media are in fact only applicable to merged audience contexts. This not to say that Web 2.0 networked social media as a term does not encapsulate a meaningful set of changes in the focus of online interaction. Rather, that out of the changes brought by Web 2.0 networked social media, the merged audience structure is the most significant in terms of what it means for identity and self-presentation online. It is the merged audience aspect of these sites that brings convergence, context collapse, accountability, identifiability and a renewed focus on a narrowly defined authenticity (Boyd 2007, 2008). Pseudonymous media have received less attention in recent years, but it is important to note that they still play an important role in contemporary online interaction, and the research has shown they still carry with them the same potentials for identity play and development as earlier media, and have unique and useful affordances.

The terminology used in this thesis is useful in encapsulating a distinction that is more relevant to describing how and why online media differ in their affordances for online self-presentation, identity and self-development. Future research should take care to recognise this difference and its significance, and the need to take into account the heterogeneity within networked social media and the continuities as well as discontinuities between old and new media.

Some researchers, focusing on one subset of Web 2.0 media, have understandably extrapolated the results of their media to other Web 2.0 media in a way which understates the variation within the category and the continued presence of pseudonymous media within and outwith Web 2.0. However, some, such as Turkle, in her recent book critical of current trends in online interaction (2011), have conflated pseudonymous and merged audience sites and such disparate media as Second Life and Facebook as if they are parts of same trends in contemporary online interaction. Turkle's analysis represents an example of how some approaches miss out upon important distinctions in types of media.

Turkle describes how the always connected, 'always on' 'culture of connection' across merged audiences and offline bounds causes impression management anxieties and social obligations, and imposes upon time that would have otherwise been used for more significant self reflection and social connection (2011). Yet she fails to note that these aspects are particular to merged audience sites and their particular connections and integrations with daily life. More importantly, given the ways her analysis often conflates the two as "virtual places", she also does not take into account that other pseudonymous media she mentions, such as Second Life, are relatively free of such anxieties and allow the re-establishment of the compartmentalisation and control she views as part of what is lost on the social networking site. She sees both Facebook and Second Life as places which lead people to present "the fantasy of who we want to be" (2011:153), yet her analysis of this, despite highlighting the impression management anxieties of merged audience site users, misses the ways in which these differing contexts and their differing conceptions of the authentic enable and constrain 'being who you want to be'. While she highlights the anxieties and ambivalence of merged audience site users towards their use of these sites and their integration in daily life, she misses that the backlash against the shallow, 'narcissistic' and 'idealistic' behaviour many feel these sites promote is specific to merged audience sites. This unhelpfully overstates the continuities between these media, neglecting important differences in their potentials and affordances.

There is also the potential for the way in which self-presentation and the relationship between online and offline life is described by researchers to obscure important differences between the pseudonymous and the merged audience site. This can particularly make it difficult to describe how site features and differing connections with the audience interact to produce differing conceptions of the 'authentic self' and serve differing functions. Conceptions of self-presentation as involving the performance of an identity online may struggle to fully encapsulate the ways in which audience and setting and expectations and relationships and identities carried across from other contexts influence the performance. Moreover, while it is important to remember that online environments are not 'disembodied', a focus on embodiment which casts the social media profile, avatar and photograph alike as a 'virtual body' (Boyd 2007; Sünden 2003; Van Doorn 2011), often makes for a somewhat ambiguous relationship between body, context and presentation. It also makes it difficult to describe how self-presentation is regulated by conceptions of authenticity on differing sites which do, in part, cast the body as something 'offline' and connected but distinct from its online mediated presentation.

The adaptations of Goffman's theory of self-presentation used by many researchers (Boyd 2007, 2008; Siibak 2008; Paparcharissi and Mendelson 2011; Pearson 2009), are better suited to acknowledging the cross-contextual aspects of self-presentation and the ways in which self, audience and context interact dialectically, than conceptions which concentrate solely on embodiment and performance.

In describing online self-presentation, it is important to conceptualise self-presentation in a way that easily encapsulates the contextual impact of site features and differing audiences on what is shown, and how self-presentation is conceptualised and regulated online, including by authenticity. This is also important in allowing for the description of the mix of continuities and discontinuities expected between online and offline self representation. The terminology developed in this thesis, which sees self-presentation in terms of the development of personal images, which can be similar or vary across online and offline contexts, is one way of doing this, which also allows for the separation of intent and results, and for a conception

of an aspect of authenticity as involving a congruence of aspects of personal image.

The results discussed throughout this thesis identify a distinction between those who primarily use merged audience sites and those who primarily use pseudonymous sites- but it is important to note there is considerable overlap in the use of both. For this reason, it's particularly important to notice the ways in which these sites converge as well as diverge, and the contextual and cross-contextual ways in which they affect self-presentational practice.

Since many site users used both pseudonymous and merged audience media, this raises the question of how these differing sites interact and jointly shape their attitudes to identity and authenticity online. In general, a person's level of investment in pseudonymous media correlated with a broader conception of the authentic, and with a greater concern for maintaining compartmentalisation, privacy and control, as well as a greater awareness of how merged audience sites complicate privacy and impression management. Those who started off using pseudonymous sites and then went on to also use merged audience sites often adopted some aspects of merged audience site users' critical perspective towards other users, but retained a concern for privacy, a preference for compartmentalisation, and a broader view of what constitutes the 'authentic' online. Greater investment in the use of merged audience sites correlated with a more skeptical view towards the authenticity of online interaction, which served to dissuade them from deeper investment with pseudonymous media. Fewer interviewees had thus started off as merged audience site users, then gone on to use pseudonymous media, and where they had, they tended to downplay the significance of pseudonymous media. However, it is possible that greater familiarity and investment with pseudonymous media could expand such users' views of the authentic in time.

There is some indication then, that initial familiarity with either type of site discourages full investment in the use of the other. There is also, however, an indication that greater familiarity and fuller engagement with a breadth of media encourages a more fluid conception of authenticity online and a greater concern for maintaining privacy and compartmentalisation, as well as a greater awareness of the

ways in which sites enable and complicate these aspects. It would be useful for further research to consider in more detail how differing degrees of overlap in use of these types of site affect how site users conceive of authenticity and self, and also how transference from pseudonymous contexts to merged audience contexts and vice versa affects site users' perceptions of what they and others do online. As both types of sites continue to have a life both within and outwith Web 2.0, so they also still have the ability to have differing roles in the same users' lives, and to dialectically produce differing contextual ways of thinking about online interaction.

It is important to avoid the technologically determinist suggestion that the relationship here is a uni-directional one in which these sites simply impose particular ways of thinking and acting and conceptualising identity upon their users. Rather, the specific conceptions of authenticity and identity that emerge from these sites involve a relationship between the sites and their users, emerging not simply in adherence to the types of acting and behaving that these sites encourage, but often in resistance to them, as users react to the pressures put upon them in these contexts. Cyclically, also, the audience a site attracts and the uses they put the site to affect what is possible on these sites (Boyd 2008). Additionally, it must be remembered that users come to use these sites for particular purposes related to the broader context of their identities and lives, and that their use of different types of sites can be motivated by differing aspects of their lives.

The comparative approach taken in this research has shown that looking at the points at which types of sites converge and diverge gives insight not only into the specificities of each site, but also into the reasons *why* different site features encourage differing conceptions of self, identity and authenticity and different ways of acting, interacting and presenting the self. A comparative approach is of course not practical for every study, nonetheless, bearing in mind the broader history and the broader context of online media is important when conducting research into online media. This aids not only specificity but also generalisability, which is particularly important in a fast moving field such as online research.

The findings on the differences between merged audience and pseudonymous sites

are generalisable beyond specific sites and across time in so far as they refer to effects which emerge due to interactions between their users and particular site features and configurations of the audience. For example, it can be supposed that the effects of the merged audience on conceptions of authenticity and self will apply to some degree to any site or even any context in which there is a merging of audiences.

Thus, a contribution of the research has been to identify the ways specific site features, types of use and arrangements of audience interact to encourage particular conceptions of identity and authenticity, and regulate their affordances and potentials. To over-assume the applicability of these to emergent new media without evaluating the extent to which this is the case on an individual basis, would of course be erring in the direction of over-assuming rather than under-assuming continuity, but they provide some useful indications worth considering.

### **Compartmentalisation, control and the ‘authentic’**

Researchers of online media should take into account in particular the degree of anonymity and compartmentalisation of audiences possible on a site, and the degree of control given over self-presentation and over privacy. As this PhD has illustrated, these factors influence the freedoms, constraints and affordances of online media.

Merged audience features complicate impression management in collapsing contexts, and it is this aspect which attaches greater accountability, fixity and permanence to online interaction, and encourages self-surveillance as well as self-disclosure (Boyd 2007, 2008). The ability to control who sees what is disclosed online and to compartmentalise contexts from each other is enabled by pseudonymity and allows for the use of online media for more reflexive identity development. This frees users from requirements to be consistent to the pre-existing expectations of the audience, reduces concerns about privacy, and enables greater creativity and self-development. Pseudonymous sites can allow for the seeking out of a suitable audience, compartmentalised from other contexts, in which to develop aspects of the self that cannot find expression in other contexts.

Research into Web 2.0 media has explored the ways in which merged audience sites' collapsed contexts make self-presentational practices difficult, complicate privacy, and anchor self-presentation to the offline (Boyd 2007; Marwick 2011; Papacharissi 2011; Pearson 2009; Sessions 2009). An important contribution of the research has been that it has illuminated the important role of authenticity in how self-presentation is regulated and how identity and self-presentation are conceptualised. Authenticity is an important aspect of not just how but also *why* the cumulative effect of these sites' differing structures and uses is a different conception of authenticity, identity and the self, which has implications also for how gender and other aspects of identity are conceived of.

There was a core, common aspect to site users' conceptions of the 'authentic self' identified by the research- namely, the authentic self was defined as 'centred' and 'substantialist' (Ferrera 2009). An 'authentic' presentation of self was identified as that which allowed for a congruence of self image, desired image and public image. That site users have this shared sense of a coherent self through differing contexts, is a significant finding in itself in showing the persistence of individualistic conceptions of self, and how authenticity as a narrative norm serves to validate and make sense of identity through differing contexts. Viewing self-presentational practices and aspects of interaction as motivated by a desire to maintain or seek congruence of personal image illuminates how authenticity can serve as a motivator for social action. Beyond this basic similarity, there is variance in site users' conceptions of authenticity, self and identity and the ideal links between the personal and the cultural. This is because of the ways in which these sites' differing configuration of the audience and level of compartmentalisation of contexts enables or threatens personal authenticity and exposes or conceals inconsistencies across online and offline contexts. Threats to the congruence of personal image, and perceptions of inauthenticity in others, motivate individuals to take steps to reassert their personal authenticity.

The merged audience produces a narrow conception of the authentic self as naturally

emergent and unreflexive because it complicates personal authenticity while increasing the perception of inauthenticity in others. The response to multiplicity, ambiguities of genre and demands of ‘image consciousness’, encouragements to engage in self-branding, to a lack of control over the life of data shared, to the complexities of impression management and ‘the distributed presence’ (Van Dijk 2008) of self-presentation in front of merged contexts- is to retreat to a simplistic conception of self and a narrow conception of the authentic. Merged audience site users’ narrow conception of authenticity naturalises authentic self-presentation as involving a congruence of self image, desired image and public image which is not consciously strived for, but naturally emergent. This concern for authenticity solves the initial problem of feelings of disrupted personal authenticity. However, because this involves a narrowing of the criteria for authenticity, and a naturalisation of impression management processes, this also cyclically increases anxieties about authenticity. Site users affirm their own personal authenticity by contrasting it with a ‘polemical’ view of the inauthentic practices of others, resulting in a gap between how they perceive their own site use, and how they perceive the site use of others (Davis 2010).

It is only on the pseudonymous site, which offers a greater potential for deception, yet allows for more control and compartmentalisation of audiences- that authenticity can be something which is reflexively sought and identity something which can be consciously developed. Here, the congruence of self image, desired image and public image is acknowledged a moving dialectic, where the audience’s feedback cyclically can influence and draw out and validate authentic aspects of the self.

This reflects that authenticity is situationally contingent and emerges through negotiation with others, and serves as a narrative norm as a way of solving the problems caused by the stresses and pressures of self-presentation and interaction. Due to differing site structures and their relationships with the audience, and resultant conceptions of authenticity, users of these sites vary in how multi-faceted they view the self, and in the extent to which they view identity as something which you merely ‘have and maintain’ or something which you can reflexively ‘do’, online.



This directly impacts the potentials for agency and reflexivity in affecting the extent to which conscious choice and reflexive self-development is considered authentic.

### **Authenticity, agency and impression management**

This finding in itself has important implications for online research in highlighting an often under-theorised aspect of processes of identification, self-presentation and interaction. This helps to go beyond common, over-simplistic understandings of the 'authentic' online as 'authenticity to offline life'. While many merged audience site users define it this way, pseudonymous site users may feel *more* authentic online than in other contexts. Authenticity has a complex role that goes beyond its relationship with offline life, serving as a pervasive, morally infused narrative norm which regulates self-presentation and the links between the self and the social, solves problems of self-incoherence, validates identity play, and delineates the bounds of acceptable and unacceptable practice.

In popular media and in academic work, social networking sites are critiqued for encouraging a consumerist over-concentration on 'image' and self-presentation as self-branding, as well as for eroding privacy and encouraging the exposure of previously private data about taste preferences and experiences for profit (Andrejevic 2005; Hand 2012; Hearn 2008; Marwick 2011; Turkle 2011; Scholz 2008). However, researchers (Boyd 2007, 2008, 2010; Hand 2012; Van Doorn 2010) have also stressed the ways in which site users exert agency and self expression within the bounds set down by these sites. Authenticity and its interactions with site structure and conceptions of self and identity, have implications for understanding the ways in which these sites constrain or enable agency and complicate privacy and disclosure, in forming an under-examined part of how users manage the impression management and privacy challenges of merged audience sites in particular.

The research has shown that the users of merged audience sites feel genuine anxieties over impression management and authenticity- these are fraught and difficult places for self-presentation, in contrast to pseudonymous media which are spoken of in

more positive and relaxed terms by their users. The research has highlighted that rather than engaging uncritically in these sites, the users of merged audience networked social media may take a critical approach towards these media, critiquing them as 'image conscious', over narcissistic and focused on self-branding at the expense of social connections. This is grounded in broader critical discourses and concepts and narrative norms surrounding these media, many of which mirror concerns in academia, as well as being grounded in individualistic conceptions of the authentic, essential, pre-social self.

It should be pointed out that the discourses and conceptions of authenticity merged audience site users call upon to downplay their anxieties, affirm their personal authenticity and critique the practices of others as image conscious and self-promotional, actually have a part to play in increasing the anxieties around authenticity that they were brought in to counter. This is because they narrow the criteria for authenticity, making it more difficult to achieve. In discussing how users meet with the challenges of impression management and privacy on the merged audience site, it has not often been pointed out that the strategies users employ as they develop norms of disclosure and regulate the behaviour of others, have to do with authenticity, and that these often end up falsely naturalising identity and self, while delegitimising the conscious impression management and privacy management necessary on these sites.

Facebook and other merged audience sites have offered more fine-tuned privacy controls in recent years, but maintaining control is made difficult by the continuously shifting nature of their privacy controls. Merged audience site users meet these difficulties and regain some control by creating their own sets of guidelines for appropriate disclosure, and by creatively adapting site features (Paparcharissi 2011; Boyd 2007, 2008). The research has shown that site users have a 'critical ethics of disclosure'- prioritising balance and tellability and appropriateness, and engaging in 'analytic labour' in managing what to disclose (Karakayali and Kilic 2013).

However, merged audience site users' conceptions of authentic self-presentation as

ideally unreflexive complicate matters in falsely naturalising the complex impression management processes required to maintain an appearance of authenticity. A perception that conscious self-monitoring is inauthentic leads to a downplaying of the role of conscious choice which can serve to obscure the ways merged audience sites encourage self surveillance and indeed, mutual surveillance. This furthers a tendency identified by Andrejevic for these sites to encourage an ‘ideology of responsabilisation’ which blames other site users for indiscretion, rather than criticises the use others make of what is shared (2008:479; Boyd 2008). As Marwick has pointed out (2011) there are popular websites (for example, lamebook.com) dedicated to showcasing humorous Facebook transgressions, which serve as a means of defining and ‘policing’ appropriate use by blaming and shaming those who disregard the often unspoken rules of impression management and act ‘inappropriately’.

Authenticity, then, serves as means of validating and affirming an individualistic conception of self, in distinction to the demands and expectations of others, and as a means of critiquing cultural narratives and images, but can also serve to over-naturalise and essentialise self-presentational practices in ways that constrain agency.

### **Between authenticity and anonymity**

It is particularly important to avoid furthering simplistic views of the authentic as consistency with offline life in a context in which conceptions of anonymity and authenticity as inversely correlated are being used by companies and other institutions as a reason to further the erosion of potentials for pseudonymity online.

As Internet interaction has been subject to increasing attempts at control and governance (Lievrouw 2012), authenticity and anonymity are sometimes erroneously cast as opposing choices in debates in popular media about the limitations, risks and freedoms of online interaction. For example, Guardian writer Aleks Krotoski treats the choices for the Internet’s future as a ‘battle’ between the free unaccountability of ‘anonymity’ and the restrained accountability of ‘authenticity’, facilitated by the

linking of online content to given names and personal details (2012).

A conflation of the ‘authentic’ with the identifiable and the accountable is the justification given by Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg for the company’s increased drive to consolidate online identities by linking all Internet activity to a single, identifiable and verifiable Facebook profile (Krotoski 2012; Zuckerberg, in Cutler 2010). Zuckerberg has gone so far as to suggest that having multiple images and ‘identities’ online is an example of a “lack of integrity”, and claims that thanks to his company, “the days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly” (Zuckerberg 2010, quoted in Cutler 2010: para 14). Those who run merged audience sites have claimed that they add a new ‘authenticity’ and trustworthiness to Internet interaction because they “privilege a single identity presentation as both ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ ” (Marwick 2005:3).

The results challenge claims that attaching ‘real names’ and merging audiences will make for a social context which is considered ‘more authentic’ or ‘open’ by its users. Indeed the research has given more evidence of the opposite. On merged audience sites, the transparency and visibility of others’ social practices, makes inauthenticity seem more commonplace and authenticity more difficult to achieve, increasing site users’ anxieties about impression management. This brings an accountability to online interaction that goes beyond attaching consequences to misbehaviour and attaches a constraining ‘accountability’ to being consistent to multiple public images established elsewhere.

Additionally, rather than the integration of merged audience sites into everyday life leading to a perception of online interaction as increasingly authentic, merged audience site users tend to view online interaction as a supplemental, less significant, potentially inauthentic mirror of the offline. While researchers have largely moved on from seeing online and offline as separate spheres of interaction (Beer and Burrows 2007; Marwick 2011; Paparcharissi 2011) a divide remains relevant to how Internet users themselves conceptualise online interaction, and this should be taken

into account.

### **The importance of control and compartmentalisation**

As discussed in the authenticity chapter, increased tendencies to merge online accounts across many once pseudonymous sites by linking them with Facebook can be expected to have a constraining effect upon the potentials of online interaction and increase anxieties surrounding personal authenticity. As Marwick suggests, where audiences are increasingly merged, interaction will be increasingly “circumscribed by what is safe: that is, what is acceptable to be publicly judged, permanently recorded, and viewed by all manner of people, from one’s family to one’s future employer” (Marwick 2011:328). Where compartmentalisation is made more difficult, it can be expected that there will be a lessened ability to use online media for reflexive development of the self, and a more limited conception of what counts as ‘authentic’. The research has shown that women and LGBT people benefit in particular from being able to maintain control over who sees what in pseudonymous contexts. Increasing tendencies to merge online audiences and display given names and personal information, could potentially discourage their participation in some online contexts (Boyd 2008).

The research has shown that while anonymity and authenticity have their parts to play in shaping the freedoms and accountability of online interaction, they are not opposing choices. Pseudonymity does not necessarily lead to perceived inauthenticity or a complete lack of accountability, nor does a lack of anonymity necessarily lead to perceived authenticity. Moreover, both anonymity and its opposite carry risks online, as both anonymous bullying and stalking, and a process of ‘doxing’ a person by exposing the links between their online accounts and removing their anonymity, are now common means of harassing individuals and threatening their safety (Shelke and Badiye 2013).

What is most important is giving site users the ability to compartmentalise audiences, and control what is shown to whom. Pseudonymity is one way of enabling this, but it

is this control, rather than anonymity or pseudonymity in itself, that makes the difference. In stressing this, the research contributes a more nuanced and balanced picture of online media and what enhances and constrains agency and self-development online.

### **Authenticity, social theory, and the fragmented self**

This thesis has addressed the comparative lack of a detailed focus on authenticity in the study of online interaction, in showing its importance to conceptions of identity and self-presentation online. Authenticity, of course, is not only important to the study of the Internet, but has broader relevance to the theorisation of identity, self-presentation and gender (Boyle 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 2009; Fine 2003; Vannini and Williams 2009).

The research findings provide some interesting input into two enduring debates in the theorisation of contemporary identity. Several theorists have suggested that contemporary society places a high value upon authenticity, as part of a reflexive search for coherence through a multiplicity of consumer choices (Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Taylor 1991). Others have, in contrast, suggested that authenticity has become obsolete in a world of diffuse signification and fluidity (Baudrillard 1994; Bauman 1996; Chaney 2004). The question of the extent to which the 'search for authenticity' remains an aspect of contemporary culture is linked also to the question of the degree to which individuals conceive of their identities as multiple and fragmented, or see them in terms of unity and coherence over time (Robards and Bennett 2011; Lawler 2008). This maps loosely onto the distinction between those who theorise us as living in conditions of 'reflexive' late modernity, where authenticity and coherence are valued, in contrast to a postmodern, post-structuralist or 'liquid' social world where fixity and coherence is rejected (Bauman 1996; Chaney 2004).

As we have seen throughout the thesis, these sites exemplify and confound notions of contemporary society as fragmented, dis-embedded and involving shifting,

ephemeral social ties, and have significant but differing conceptions of the authentic. The points at which merged audience and pseudonymous site users' conceptions of the authentic diverge and converge are illuminating in suggesting what kinds of social conditions promote particular discourses and narratives of authenticity and self. This does much to illustrate the complexities of working out how broader macro-level theorisations about contemporary society- and how it influences identity- play out at a ground level. The differing ways in which merged audience and pseudonymous site users respond to the differing stresses and social conditions on these types of sites support the idea that challenges to authenticity increase the perceived importance of authenticity. However, they complicate the idea that this need always involve a reflexive project of seeking coherence through instability and multiplicity.

The conditions on merged audience sites which increase image consciousness, exemplify aspects of consumer culture, and encourage reflexive narrativisation are responded to with a resistant affirmation of the pre-social 'individualistic natural self' as *unreflexive*, natural and unconstructed. This affirms common conceptions (Boyle 2004; Giddens 1991; Lawler 2008; Lewin and Williams 2009; McCarthy 2009; Taylor 1991) that authenticity is a means of achieving feelings of self-coherence through increasing multiplicity and instability. There is evidence here that a preference for the 'real' is a key aspect of contemporary culture- "as a direct result of people's fears that what they consider real is endangered- a fear that every experience in the modern world is trying to persuade, them, shape them or cajole them" (Boyle 2004:xvii).

However, it also shows that this affirmation of authenticity need not involve heightened reflexivity, conscious construction and an acceptance of the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991). Instead of using conscious action to 'solve' the problem of lack of coherence, they reaffirm the lack of a need for it through a naturalising discourse, and in doing so, exhibit less, rather than more awareness of their social actions.

Site users' claims that their own actions are authentic and natural are often combined with a claim that *others* are presenting 'desired images', and following cultural narratives and images. Davis suggests "the gap between what *I* do, and what *everyone else* does shows not only that the pre-emptive construction of documentable situations is likely going on, but also that this is a practice which we hide from ourselves" (2010: para 5). That individuals are constructing and presenting images and engaging in impression management, while downplaying the notion that they are consciously doing so, is a finding that must be taken into account in studying interaction and self-presentation and identity as a whole. Merged audience site users do not embrace postmodern multiplicity or the playful possibilities of experimentation, nor do they valorise reflexive, conscious projects of self-development, and often reject the promises of self-branding and the 'demotic turn'.

On pseudonymous sites, despite the postmodern potentials of an environment which allows for swift changes of image, discourses of authenticity provide coherence and stability through any experimentation and ambiguity. Only among pseudonymous site users was there evidence of site users openly engaging in something akin to Giddens' 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1993). This reflexive self-development was not framed as a reaction to a feeling of loss or instability, so much as a positive process of 'drawing out' pre-existing 'natural' aspects of the self. Rather than seeing their identities as fragmented or threatened, pseudonymous site users stressed the stability and coherence of their sense of self, seeing themselves as moving through compartmentalised contexts which stressed different 'authentic' aspects of themselves, incorporating these within personal narratives and weaving a thread of coherence through multiplicity.

### **Accounting for subjectivity**

An implication of the research findings, then, is that it is important to account for the role of authenticity in how individuals conceive of themselves and others, and the links between the self and the social. It is important also to account for subjectivity, as the point at which the external and internal movements of identification meet



within the individual's conception of their 'authentic' self.

Researchers and theorists should be cautious in assuming that reflexivity and conscious construction is a valorised means of self-development in the face of destabilisation and change, and threats to self-coherence. Despite discourses that posit that 'identity' is in crisis (Bauman 1996; Chaney 2004) the findings suggest that when coherence is threatened or authenticity cast into doubt, strong legitimating discourses and narrative norms of authenticity can reassure, stabilise and reassert the coherence and value of the self- and that this need not be through reflexive self-development. These narrative norms and discourses aid the construction of personal narratives which affirm a sense of self-coherence over time and through differing contexts. However, if authenticity is reaffirmed in ways which narrow the criteria for what is seen as 'authentic', in response to perceived inauthenticity, this can cyclically increase anxieties around authenticity and cause further destabilisation, in making inauthenticity more visible and contested.

Merged audience site users showed a critical rejection of the idea of the 'demotic turn', in which the ordinary person's life and its presentation online overlaps increasingly with that of 'celebrity' culture and media imagery (Turner 2006; Marshall 2010), affirming a divide between ordinary life and idealised cultural images and narratives. They reject self-branding, in which the self is marketed as an idealised image for consumption and approval, and rail against the idea of being expected to produce images for others to consume, while also condemning the conscious use of taste to portray a particular image, style or lifestyle. Yet there are elements of a consumerist attitude to how they evaluate others- they expect them to produce content which interests them, and they view others as if they are marketing themselves. Their rejection of these aspects is effective in affirming the authenticity of their own identities and priorities, yet its assertion of the essentialist authentic self renders social processes opaque to them in a way that complicates impression management. It also results in making authenticity more difficult not just for those who wish to engage in self-branding and act 'like celebrities', but also for the ordinary person, who becomes scrutinised in greater detail for any perceived

inauthenticity.

Insistence upon a singular, essentialist form of authenticity also casts the online as an inauthentic, idealised reflection of the offline, in a way that furthers perceived offline-online divides and hampers the potential of online contexts to offer affordances different from those offline. This overall shows how authenticity can meet with and be used to underpin a counter-narrative or discourse against consumerist tendencies in society, yet also highlights the ways in which authenticity can falsely naturalise other social processes, and the ways in which this can have unintended consequences for agency.

The notion of a pre-social, centred ‘authentic’ self, existing beyond social construction must be considered as a potential site for reflexive action and resistance as well as a component of the ways in which identifications and social differentiations can be normalised and naturalised. A resistant desire to reassert ‘authenticity’, can be part of a movement to critique tradition and commercialisation, but it can also serve as a motivation for movements which attempt to reassert ‘tradition’ as authentic, complicating the general picture of a move towards detraditionalisation (Boyle 2004).

While it may seem an obvious point to state that individuals conceive of the existence of an essential, authentic, centred self, this point seems to become somewhat lost between post-structuralists’ “rejection of identity” (McNay 2000:18) and a general desire to avoid essentialism and stress that the self is discursively produced. It is not enough to simply note that there is “no meaningful sense in which there is a doer behind the deed, a person behind the mask” (Lawler 2008:101) when the conception that there is one has an important role in how individuals experience and conceptualise themselves and their lives and their relationships with the social world. Nor is it enough to essentialise authenticity as natural, when it is a social process (Holstein and Gubrium 2009). The conception of the self as pre-social, centred and substantial is itself the product of a long history of individualistic discourses of identity in Western ‘romantic’ thought (Ferrera 2009; Vannini and Williams 2009; Taylor 1991).

However, looking at the ways in which concepts of the authentic self are drawn on, conceptualised and spoken about is relevant to understanding how identity and self-concepts work and what regulates and affects self-presentation. These conceptions are used to meet with, negotiate and navigate the kinds of macro-level social changes and pressures of multiplicity and destabilisation conceptualised by social theorists as aspects of contemporary society. Compared to the attention given to authenticity in macro-level theory, there has been a comparative lack of theory dealing with how authenticity structures everyday interaction.

There has been some work, drawn upon in this thesis, which has looked at the sociological implications of authenticity at a variety of levels, creating for example, typologies of conceptions of self and authenticity, (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Ferrera 2009) and mapping out how it can act as a means of motivation and how it links with conceptions of self and identity (Weigert 2009; Vannini and William 2009). The work of Goffman also provides some insight into the ways in which authenticity matters in interaction, discussing how social actors have their performances validated in interaction and maintain an artificial distinction between the 'sacred' pre-social self, detached from the demands of a more public audience, and the 'profane' roles which must be performed front stage (Goffman 1967; Lawler 2008). In the context of online interaction the work of Marwick and Boyd (2010) has shown how concepts of authenticity create and solve problems in networked social media.

More work needs to be done to examine the linkages between macro-level conceptions of authenticity and self, and those which occur at a micro-level, and how micro-level conceptions emerge from differing social contexts in response to differing concerns and pressures. There is a need to take into account the ways in which conceptions of authenticity and resultant conceptions of the self can engender forms of resistance as well as naturalising social concepts. This research has identified the conceptions of authenticity emergent from online contexts, noting that they have in common that they conceive the self as having a centred, essential 'core',

and valorise the congruence of aspects of personal image. It has also shown that disruptions to the congruence of personal image threaten personal authenticity in ways that demand action to restabilise self-coherence. Looking at the ways in which differing contexts and pressures exert disruptive influences upon the coherence of image will aid an understanding of the variance of how authenticity can be used as a means of self-affirmation and resistance.

### **Gender, authenticity and the Internet**

As the previous chapter on gender has explored, looking at authenticity helps to further an understanding of the bounds and affordances of online interaction for gender, as well as the ways in which masculinities and femininities and gender are conceptualised and negotiated and resisted.

As the Internet has become a more taken for granted aspect of everyday life, there has been a tendency to view older debates about the extent to which the Internet offers unique freedoms and potentials for gender as some combination of the naïve and the obsolete. Claims of a potential utopia for gender were quickly trampled down under the weight of the evidence that the Internet offers plenty opportunities for the continuance of gendered differentiation, stereotyping and sexism (Armentor-Cota 2011; Carstensen 2009).

Gender is indeed not ‘detached’ or ‘disembodied’ online, yet in refuting ideas that online spaces could provide a liberation from the ‘tyranny of gender’, researchers have understated the extent to which online spaces have offered, and continue to offer, unique opportunities. In revisiting earlier debates in a contemporary context, the research has offered fresh input into long standing debates about gender online, particularly in looking at the role of authenticity in regulating interaction and experimentation with identity, and in provoking reflexivity about gender.

Previous research has tended to treat authenticity solely as a limiting factor for gender online- either because ‘authentic’ gender remained untouched by playful

surface level experimentations with gender, or because the body was still treated as the 'arbiter of truth' of gender online (Armentor-Cota 2011; Kendall 2002; Boler 2007). In stressing the role of authenticity in authenticating the processes of identity play, the research provides a more nuanced picture of the limits and potentials of experimentation with gender identity online. Authenticity and its particularities, when examined in a way that does not merely re-entrench an online/offline authentic/inauthentic divide, provides an important theoretical means of adding nuance to an overplayed and reductive set of dualisms between online and offline, virtual and 'real' - between ideas of online spaces as 'identity workshops' or as mere impoverished reflections of offline life.

Gender emerges as something which is potentially challenged and disrupted and interrogated online through identity play and the gender ambiguities of pseudonymous contexts, but this identity play must be validated as authentic, and must involve a congruence of self image, desired and public image. The visible traces of the body are sometimes obscured online, but the body's imagined significance persists in defining what a person's 'authentic gender' is seen to be, tying it to physical sex (Boler 2007). On all types of site, gender was conceptualised by site users as sets of linkages between surface level differences of taste and style, hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, a person's gender identity, and the physical body. However, site users' positioning of differences of taste and style at the top level of these linked signs as the most obvious 'signs' of gender, reflects the prominence of image mediated, consumerist influences on society which have resulted in gender being partly reframed in terms of consumer choices and cultural images. Gender was often engaged with at the level of the cultural image, but these images were linked through signification to the normative discourses and narratives which make up dominant conceptions of gender. Site users' stressed the disruptibility of the 'chains' of gender, showing that there is some space between the linkages, accounting for the transformability as well as durability of contemporary concepts of gender, masculinities and femininities.

In comparing pseudonymous media and merged audience media, this thesis has also

provided insight into how transformations in popular Internet media affect the potentials for gender. The narrower bounds of the 'authentic' on merged audience sites encourage a more taken for granted attitude towards online gender. Pseudonymous sites often provide a context where gender ambiguity disrupts the ease of gender attribution, and provide the potential for experimentation with the presentation of differing gendered images, provoking more awareness of gendering processes.

Resistance to gendered norms was aided by the individualistic discourse and narrative norm of authenticity pervasive on online media, which stresses individual choice and conceives of a pre-social self. The thesis has theorised gender as involving dialectics of being and doing gender, but also of being subject to gendering processes. Where gendering processes interact with conceptions of the authentic self, and the components of personal image, the interplay of these elements is an aspect of how gender is reproduced, resisted and reformed. Those moments where expectations to be accountable to normative ideas of gender were experienced as disrupting the authentic congruence of aspects of personal image, provoked criticism and resistance to the idea of gender norms as obligatory, as well as potentially motivating adherence to these normative conceptions.

The example of gender shows the importance of an account of identity which acknowledges the resistant potentials of reflexivity on the distance between the 'self' – in terms of a person's individual subjectivity and identifications- and the social expectations attached to these identifications, including cultural narratives, discourses and images. This is particularly important for those identifications, like gender, based on notions of differences located in the body and visual presentation, 'imposed' from the outside and not fully chosen by the individual. While discourses and narrative norms of authenticity can falsely naturalise certain processes of reflexive construction and identification, the valorisation of the 'pre-social' self as apart from the social, serves to call others into question by encouraging this kind of critical reflection. This caused some site users to separate out nominal and substantive aspects of gender as identity.

A further implication of the research, as discussed in the previous chapter, is that in theorising multiple masculinities and femininities, theorists need to take into account that behaviour that is not linked definably to hegemonic masculinity or emphasised femininity will not likely be perceived as 'doing' masculinity or femininity. Conceptions of gender which redefine all behaviours and ways of presenting the self as new kinds of subordinate masculinities and femininities do not encapsulate this aspect. It is important within the theorisation of gender not to tautologically suggest that even attempts to avoid presenting gender constitute masculinities or femininities (Risman 2000).

The account of gender given in this thesis overcomes some of the aspects of subjectivity which are neglected in performative conceptions of identity, while also avoiding a static conception of gender as an unchanging, fixed aspect of identity. Incorporating the role of narrative and image into conceptions of gender accounts for the transformability and the weight of gender as an aspect of identity and an influential social concept.

### **The importance of the multiple aspects of identity**

As the chapter on gender has particularly illustrated, an important implication of the research is that it is important to consider the multiple aspects of identification processes. There is a need to account for the ways in which individuals conceive of their identities and exercise agency in a way that acknowledges also the ways this is limited and structured by the social contexts in which they move, interact, act and present themselves. With attentiveness to Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) criticisms that the use of 'identity' can conflate too many aspects of social processes, this research has stressed the need to be more specific about differing aspects of the dialectic processes between the self and the social. A synthesis of ideas from differing theories have, throughout this thesis, been applied and investigated with respect to online self-presentation and identity. The thesis has looked at narrative, image and performativity, as well as how conceptions of authenticity interact with

these aspects.

It has been argued, through evaluation and examination of these theories and their applicability, that conceptions of narrative, performativity or 'image' alone are insufficient in encapsulating the full depth of the aspects involved in processes of identification, self-presentation, and identity formation. This has involved looking at how well these concepts explain and illuminate how site users themselves look at and experience their identities and the process of self-presentation.

Narrative has been shown to vie with 'image' as an aspect of how Internet users conceive of and describe self-presentation, providing an interesting ground level reflection of broader theorisations of social shifts between the primacy of narrative and image in society (Chaney 2004; Lash 1994). In developing these concepts using a blend of theory and the perspectives of interviewees, the research has shown that performance, narrative, and image can be seen to refer to differing aspects of "the dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition" (Jenkins 2000:45).

Amalgamating these theories in discussion of identity processes may seem somewhat impractical as an approach. However, the amalgamation of concepts and insights from these theories can be a useful way of getting around the shortcomings of these theories when considered singly. This has been used to construct a notion of multiple dimensions of identity, which avoids determinism and voluntarism, allows for agency, and acknowledges both the changeability and durability of social concepts, and their constructive impact upon self and identity. Both narratives and images can be conceived of as involving a personal and a cultural aspect, although they are formed in dialectics with each other through interaction and immersion within culture.

The concept of narrative identity encapsulates that individuals make sense of themselves and their experiences and their place in the world over time via the construction of 'personal narratives', but also that this process involves drawing



upon cultural narratives and discourses. The pre-social self, and concepts of authenticity, are themselves the product of discourses and narratives, serving as cultural discourses and narrative norms which can be drawn upon when constructing personal narratives.

The concept of 'personal image', developed in this thesis from the ideas of Jenkins (2008) and Goffman (1967, 1969) but stemming also from the use of 'image' by interviewees themselves, allows for a conception of how identifications and self conceptions are formed by 'internal-external dialectics' in interaction. The dialectic of self image, desired image and the external and internal aspects of public image is one which, when disrupted, can threaten personal authenticity. This encapsulates the role authenticity plays in validating or challenging people's sense of coherence, as well as usefully allowing for the theorisation of a distance between intent and results in self-presentation.

The concept of the 'cultural image' was developed to encapsulate the image-like, connotative ways in which social meaning is often conveyed in contemporary culture. It captures that not all meaning can be encapsulated within concepts of narrative, discourse or text, and also that much of it involves linked chains of signification and connotation. Tastes and other aspects of self-presentation can be seen as gaining and conveying their meaning through loose connections of image mediated signs. The predominance of cultural images as an aspect of cultural meaning diversifies the kinds of meanings attached to cultural signs, and loosens, without completely erasing, the links made between certain tastes, ways of dressing and styling the self, and social categories of class, ethnicity and gender.

Personal images may draw on aspects of culture, and personal narratives may draw upon cultural narratives and be structured by narrative norms. However, individualistic discourses of authenticity challenge the validity of overly drawing upon recognisable cultural narratives or images, especially those considered culturally desirable or 'ideal'.

## **Identity, self and the social**

In giving an account of how identification processes work, it is important to take into account the ways in which culture structures and limits the possibilities of identification. It is also important to take into account points for resistance to norms and allow for the ways in which culture can be transformed over time.

The individual can be seen as having a set of identifications and ideas about themselves- a 'self image', as well as a 'desired image' they may wish to present as a 'public image' to a particular audience in interaction. These images and these ideas themselves are formed in dialectics between a person's sense of self and their identifications, and cultural images, discourses and narratives they define themselves in relation to. Because the images, narratives and styles come from broader culture, and many are linked to specific identifications- for example, women and men cannot draw in the same way on the same sets of ideas and narratives in self-presentation- there is a limited set of possibilities.

The feedback from the audience is incorporated back into self image and narratives of the self, informing the individual's sense of their positions with respect to cultural images, narratives and concepts. It is important here to take into account the unconscious, taken for granted aspects of these processes, especially given the importance of the pre-social self, valorised as 'authentic'- there may not be a conscious 'desired image' for every situation, for example. The audience may also place negative sanctions on behaviour and hold others accountable for meeting norms. In this way, self-presentation and identity depends on the validation and the reactions of the audience. Over time, experiences build up into narratives of the self, and through contact with new ideas, discourses, narratives and social contexts, new identifications, narratives and ideas can develop over time.

Temporal aspects of identity are also important in setting limits on the possibilities for the resistance and reform of social norms, as identifications and discourses and narratives relating to them become sedimented over time within individuals'

narratives of themselves (McNay 2000). While gender, as a 'primary' identification, is particularly significant as a 'long term, deep rooted' investment, this lack of 'free floating', easy transferability is also applicable to other kinds of 'deep rooted' discourses, narratives and differentiations. Recognising the role of narrative allows for the sedimented effects of experiences and ideas to be accounted for in the "dynamic unity of the self through time" (McNay 2000:78).

The ability to resist and reform cultural ideas is limited without the ability to find support from discourses, narratives and ideologies within culture. For example, the individualistic conception of the 'authentic self' as pre-social is in itself the product of broader cultural trends and does not simply emerge naturally from the individual (Lawler 2008). As shown in the gender chapter, the Internet has the ability to provide access to ideas which help individuals to build upon pre-existing reflexivity on the gap between what they feel is their 'authentic self' and what is expected of them. It makes it easier for individuals to find an audience supportive of differing ideas with respect to gender- for example, there are LGBT, feminist and genderqueer communities online which provide valuable support for differing identities and differing ways of looking at gender (Hill 2005; Boyd 2007).

A theory of identity which takes into account only the narrativising or performative or indeed aesthetic aspects of identification processes is limited in not offering descriptive terms for important aspects of identity as process. It is not only important to give a name to the differing aspects of the process, but to recognise the specific points at which differing aspects of these processes are stressed in differing contexts. The further development of theories of identification, which take into account these multiple aspects of identification and the interactional process, would be of use to sociological theory in making explicit some of the ambiguities in theories and uses of the concept of identity.

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## Appendix A

Figure A 1: Example Twitter profile

The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter profile page. The profile is for a user named 'Loudmouth gal' who lives in Somplace, California. The profile picture shows a woman with glasses and a purple background. The bio reads: 'Loudmouth gal what likes to draw a lotta things. Somplace, California'. The profile statistics are: 1,956 TWEETS, 21 FOLLOWING, and 122 FOLLOWERS. There is a 'Follow' button.

The left sidebar contains navigation links: Tweets, Following, Followers, Favourites, and Lists. Below these is a 'Follow' section with a search bar and a 'Sign up' button. The 'Photos and videos' section shows a grid of images, including a drawing of a person. The 'Worldwide Trends' section lists various trending topics like Bruno Mars, #staysstrongbillyraycyrus, Taylor Swift, #ExpresionesAndaluzas, Fresno, #YaNoTeNecesito, Assad, Robin Thicke, Breaking Bad, and Colombia.

The main content area displays a list of tweets from the user, dated from 20 Jun to 10 Jun. The tweets are:

- 20 Jun: Company BBQ tomorrow. Can't wait to like...eat hamburgers...stare at the lake and not swim in it...suck at volleyball...and draw draw draw
- 18 Jun: Sometimes I draw my coworkers during weekly meetings, sometimes I only draw parts of them [pic.twitter.com/CyEJHv1Wds](http://pic.twitter.com/CyEJHv1Wds)
- 18 Jun: My friends, always looking for ways that i can save on postage
- 18 Jun: I was told to hold off sending that fan letter I wrote to @mrdanscanlon and just ninja-sneak into the mail area next time i'm at Pixar
- 16 Jun: 14 hours is maybe too much sleep maybe
- 12 Jun: I don't know if I can honestly, non-subjectively judge my own skill level.
- 10 Jun: I've tried to live my life by his advice. I want to thank him for helping me in spirit, to get to where I am now, even if I'm just starting
- 10 Jun: ..and he wrote back this really encouraging letter telling me to work hard and persevere. I keep it framed on my desk at work as inspiration

**Figure A 2: Example Facebook Profile**

**Activity**

 played Gypsy on High 5 Casino. 24 August

 likes Hearthstone.

More recent activity ▾

**Timeline**

 **23 August**

Finally watching "Attack on Titan." Interesting how just fudging with anatomy a bit can make things look legitimately creepy.

Share

3 people like this.

 **23 August at 16:21** · 1

 also i've learned that if you get a human mouth and you put too many teeth in it, it freaks me the fuck out. teeth are creepy. 23 August at 20:29 · 2

 **23 August at 21:55**

 **22 August**

my family left me a message written on my bathroom mirror in what I am assuming is Big Fish Games bubblegum chapstick: "We love you  happy birthday xoxo." I kind of want to cry.

Share

16 people like this.

 **23 August at 04:32** · 1

 **23 August at 05:03** via mobile · 2

 **24 August at 05:52**

 **22 August**

Writing a screenplay. Just my way to heal, I think.

Share

 **21 August**

After commandeering my ipad, my sister and brother are addicted to Bingo and Casino, respectively. It's the most hilarious shit. HOW DO YOU GET MORE GEMS. HOW DO YOU GET MORE CHIPS. particularly spends too much time on omg lol slots.

Share

7 people like this.

 **22 August at 16:23**

 **19 August**

That moment when you get the bones of a song down, and you think it sounds great, and then you realize that you stole half the tune from "I think we're alone now"

Someone shoot me

Share

**Likes** · 101

 Hearthstone	 Hot Fuzz	 Mike Wazowski
 Loyal	 Passion For Savings	 Coupon Girl

**Groups** · 2

	<b>Elementary School</b> 787 members This is for anyone who has gone to...
	<b>WOWAY</b> 83 members Unofficial Facebook group for...



Figure A 3: Example DeviantArt profile

The image shows a screenshot of a DeviantArt profile page. At the top, the DeviantArt logo and navigation links are visible. The profile header includes the user's name 'Emma', location 'United States', and statistics: 'Deviant for 4 Years', 'Needs Premium Membership', '11 Deviations', '19 Comments', and '1,176 Pageviews'. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Favourites:** A grid of four featured artworks: 'Visnjevac' (14 comments), 'Omis Fortress' (11 comments), 'Omis, Croatia' (24 comments), and 'Green river' (18 comments).
- Newest Deviations:** A grid of four recent artworks: 'Till Death' (0 comments), 'Childhood Dreams' (0 comments), 'Crash' (0 comments), and 'Unstoppable Force' (2 comments).
- Writers:** A section for watching artists, currently empty.
- deviantID:** A bio section for 'Emma' from the 'United States'. It includes a personal quote: 'Current Residence: My head...it's a scary place you shouldn't visit' and 'Favourite genre of music: Piano rock it seems >.>'. It also lists interests: 'Favorite bands / musical artists' (Elton John, Billy Joel, Flogging Molly), 'Favorite writers' (Douglas Adams, T. S. Eliot, Tom Stoppard), 'Favorite games' (Chrono Cross, Age of Empires, Diablo 2), 'Favorite gaming platform' (compture), 'Tools of the Trade' (MY FINGERS!!!!), and 'Other Interests' (Writing, reading, interwebs).
- Journal:** A section for journal entries, currently empty.
- Comments:** A section for user comments. It shows three comments from users 'Sethian Taylor', 'TheBarnacle', and 'The real M31', all dated in May 2013. The comments are 'thank you for favs (sorry i m late)', 'thank you for the favs!', and 'THANK Please visit my stock'.

