# Online Social Networks

## Social Relations and
## Mediated Communication

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**Abstract:**

In just a few years, online social networks (OSNs) have become one of the most popular applications on the Internet. This thesis examines how students of Cambridge University use 'Facebook', one of the most popular social networking sites. Primary data obtained through a series of qualitative interviews and a web-based survey were used in order to determine how the use of Facebook participates in the shaping of social relations between individuals who also commonly interact with one another in an offline context. Against all speculations about the existence of a 'cyberspace', the case of Facebook in Cambridge shows how an online activity can be totally dependent on offline social life and networks. However, the reverse proposition is equally true: offline relations increasingly depend on their online reflection, coordination and elaboration on Facebook. Students rely gradually more on the OSN to organise their social life, to communicate with friends, to relate to people that they would not be connected to otherwise, and to 'check out' others. For this reason, this thesis argues that the way individuals are represented on Facebook has become crucial to how people perceive each other in general. By means of such representations and of certain social practices that are extended online, Facebook appears as a continuation of the social arena formed by social life in Cambridge, where students compete for distinction and symbolic power.

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# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**

The Internet may be considered today as an old invention. Created in 1969 it has evolved considerably and has penetrated various levels of society. After the creation of the World Wide Web at the turn of the 1990s, changes such as the advent of broadband connections have modified considerably the way people use the Internet. More recently, the new series of changes that it has undergone has been termed 'Web 2.0'.[1] Key elements of this new revolution are *blogs*, *wikis* (webpages that can be easily edited by any user), and video-sharing websites. By proclaiming 'You' as 'Person of the Year 2006', Time Magazine celebrated this same idea of an Internet in which users are viewed as contributors as much as consumers. Although the concept of Web 2.0 has been itself criticised for lacking unity,[2] the expansion of 'social software' proposing networking services such as *MySpace*, *Friendster*, or *Facebook* can be considered as part of the same wave that has been affecting the Internet.

While corresponding to diverse purposes, social networking websites nonetheless share some basic features. Users of social networking sites present themselves through 'profiles' – a page that generally displays personal information as well as a photograph. Profiles publicly list 'friends' to whom the user is connected, and tend to contain a space on which people can leave messages that remain visible to others. Individuals can use such services to maintain existing contacts or to connect to new people they meet through the online network. The boundaries of the definition of an 'online social network' (OSNs) are nevertheless in discussion: whereas some go as far as including auctioning websites or dating services in the category, for the purpose

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[1] The term 'Web 2.0' was officially coined in 2004 by Dale Dougherty (Anderson, 2007).
[2] Anderson (2007)

of this thesis, we are considering a more restrictive notion of OSN along three essential elements – 'profiles, public testimonials or comments, and publicly articulated, traversable lists of friends' as summarised by Boyd.[1] 'Friendster', which started in 2002, was the first website to offer social networking services on this model, followed, amongst others, by 'MySpace' (2003) and 'Facebook' (2004). Hundreds of other variations of OSNs have emerged,[2] sometimes aimed at specific groups such as university students or business people.

Since their birth in 2002-2003, OSNs have grown in importance, which can be measured at various levels. First, the number of users has skyrocketed; only in the United States, for example, MySpace counts more than 66 million users – representing 37 percent of all Internet users; Facebook (started in 2004) counted 14 million American users by May 2006, and 21 million in March 2007[3]. The idea that OSNs are essentially used by youth is true in certain cases; for instance, one third of Facebook visitors are 18-24 years old, and Boyd often refers to the 'twenty and thirty somethings' as the majority of those who initially used Friendster. In late 2006, 55 percent of teenagers were apparently registered on a social networking site.[4] However, recent figures have shown that OSNs have been adopted by wider age-ranges, more than half of *MySpacers* being aged 35 or above[5].

OSNs have thus caught the attention of the media, which have covered the issue extensively on both sides of the Atlantic. Journalists have pointed out many social

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[1] Boyd (in press): 4.
[2] Among the most used are ASmallWorld.com, Bebo, Classmates.com, Flickr, Hi5, LiveJournal, LinkedIn, orkut, Tribet.net, Xanga, and Yahoo 360 °.
[3] Figures issued by the independent agency ComScore Media Metrix (Press releases April 26th 2007 and June 15th 2006). Other sources (especially the social networking websites themselves) give even higher figures.
[4] Pew Internet press release (January 2007).
[5] ComScore Media Metrix, Press release October 5th 2006.

consequences of the use of OSNs, often stressing their negative consequences, such as the display of problematic content on those networks, or threats to privacy.[1] In the UK, the newspaper *The Guardian*, for example, has published 7 articles on the subject in the first five months of 2007.

One can imagine why the quick adoption of OSNs by certain segments of society could raise the interest of sociological inquiry: many users seem to spend considerable amounts of time on OSNs; they are supposed to connect people and generate new forms of communication; they publicly display social networks, etc. In the next two chapters of this thesis, the relevant literature will be reviewed; the specific focus and research questions will be developed; and the methods of inquiry that have been used for this study will be explained.

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[1] For various examples, see Ellison et. al (2006): 2.

# CHAPTER ONE

# Literature Review

Compared to the place they now take in society, the literature on OSNs is not abundant. This is probably due to their recent emergence and fast development. So far, academic literature has essentially focused on issues of self-presentation on profiles, privacy implications, impacts on 'social capital' and how sub-communities represent themselves on OSNs. Some of these issues have also been addressed in a similar way in other Internet-related studies, such as those on personal homepages. This chapter will review different approaches on how to study the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC), before focusing on the more specific literature about online social networks (OSNs). It will also underline the shortcomings of studies conducted on OSNs so far and will explain the angle taken in this thesis.

## 1. Studying the Internet

### 1.1 Exploring a 'Virtual' World?

Early studies of the Internet developed a tendency to approach issues in terms of an opposition between the 'virtual' and the 'real'. What appeared as the most prominent feature of the Internet was its capacity to extract individuals from their environment and create a sort of parallel world with its own distinct features. The Internet was new and revolutionary and one can see the appeal of picturing it in such way; however, problems

with this approach were pointed out fairly swiftly by certain scholars. Robins (1996) expressed the concern that 'virtual reality and cyberspace are commonly imagined in terms of reaction against, or opposition to, the real world' and deplored that 'the mythology of cyberspace is preferred over its sociology'. He argued that 'it is time to re-locate virtual culture in the real world'.[1]

That same idea was similarly proposed and implemented by Daniel Miller and Don Slater in their ethnographic work on Internet usage in Trinidad. 'We are certainly not dealing with a case of cyberspace as an experience of extreme *disembedding* from an offline social reality'.[2] According to these authors, it is wrong to assume that the Internet is *apart* from the rest of social life: in some cases (e.g. Turkle 1995; Slater 1998), these approaches can be valid but they cannot be taken for granted. Slater and Miller not only reject this common emphasis on 'virtuality' on methodological grounds, but they also fear that such misconceptions about the Internet might have come at the right time to serve some 'intellectual projects'. First, this notion could be used to 'substantiate postmodern claims about the increasing abstraction and depthlessness of contemporary mediated reality (Baudrillard 1988; Jameson 1991)'.[3] Namely, postmoderns may suggest that with the Internet, 'we are no longer people, but messages on one another's screens'.[4] Secondly, poststructuralists would see virtuality as a kind of 'social laboratory or even liberation in which the performative character of all social identities can be brought to light, deconstructed and transcended'. In this sense, the Internet would be considered as a place of detachment between identity and its usual

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[1] Robins (1996) : 16, 26
[2] Miller & Slater (2000): 4
[3] Ibid. : 5.
[4] Giddens (2001): 471

ties, in which 'no one can be sure of who anyone else really is, whether they are male or female, or where they are in the world'.[1]

In her *Virtual Ethnography*, Christine Hine (2000) also developed a list of principles to conduct sociological research on the Internet. Her aim was also to abolish the polarity between 'real' and 'virtual'. However, Hine has been criticised for not respecting this rule in her own research, as she failed to perceive the Internet as a social practice and a place in which existing social relationships can be extended.[2]

## 1.2 Acknowledging the Diversity of Internet Uses and Users

Another trap in which Internet-related studies sometimes fall – and which is not very often underlined – consists in conceptualising the Internet as one monolithic category. As pointed out in the first section of this chapter, that the Internet is a dynamic object that has changed over time. The more the Net develops, the more versatile it becomes. An incomplete list of possibilities includes such diverse activities as emailing, researching academic journals, listening to the radio, buying aeroplane tickets and Internet-telephony. Therefore, generalised judgements about 'the Internet' can hardly do justice to the very different activities and realities that 'Internet use' covers. Too often, the same scholars who recognise the Internet's wide range of activities eventually resort to the monolithic terms they refused, thus failing to integrate the distinction between different uses of the Internet. As Lesnard puts it, 'even if almost every author starts by acknowledging the variety of Internet use, in particular email, time spent on the Internet is rapidly reduced to a homogeneous quantity'.[3] A good example of this can be found in Nie and Erbring (2002), who report that the average user engages in 7.2 different types

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[1] Ibid.
[2] Zurawski (2001)
[3] Lesnard (2005-2007): 8

of activities on the Internet, but eventually only measure the 'impact of Internet use' without making further distinctions.[1]

This limitation shared by many 'Internet studies' commends great care when drawing grand conclusions on the subject. It seems that one way to overcome the 'rather strange assumption of homogeneity of time spent on the Internet'[2] would be to conduct more empirical research on specific aspects and uses of the Internet. Although more humble in appearance, such studies would constitute one of the best ways of discerning common patterns between different Internet-associated activities. This is one of the reasons why this work will examine one clearly delimited function of the Internet – online social networking – and will do so in a specific context.

## 2. Self-presentation and Identity construction on the Internet and Online Social Networks

As explained above, one of the defining features of OSNs consists of personal profiles that are built by each user. Although the precise form this takes varies between OSNs, profiles generally require users to present themselves, which has caught the attention of some scholars. Self-presentation on the Internet in general has also been studied independently of OSNs. Some of these analyses borrow from Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation, which will be crucial later in this thesis too. For these reasons, it appears necessary to begin with a review of certain aspects of Goffman's theory.

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[1] Nie & Erbring (2002): 277-278
[2] Lesnard (2005-2007): 8

## 2.1 Goffman and Self-Presentation

In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman proposed an original interpretation of people's appearance to others, which he approached as the 'participant's *dramaturgical* problem of presenting the activity before others'.[1] His starting point is that human beings are generally interested in acquiring information about strangers entering their social lives; they might want to identify his 'socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc.'[2] Since the duration of direct interaction between individuals may be limited, individuals have to rely on a certain number of elements provided by others, which allow them to make inferences about characteristics of the person in question. According to Goffman, these signs fall into two categories: those that are *given* and those that are *given off*. The former refers to 'communication in the narrow sense', that is 'verbal symbols used admittedly and solely to convey information'; whereas the latter include a 'wide range of actions that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor'.[3] Since others gain some impressions of a person from all these signs, it is in the person's interest to guide others' 'responsive treatment' of him or her. As the author puts it, 'when an individual appears before others, he will have many motives for trying to control the impressions they receive of the situation'. Goffman aims to uncover 'common techniques that persons employ to sustain such impressions'.[4] The practice of 'impression management' is more or less conscious and follows different methods. It can be carried out in a 'thoroughly calculating manner' or slightly more subconsciously. It can also derive from one's traditions or belonging to a certain social group.[5]

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[1] Goffman (1959): 13
[2] Ibid.: 1
[3] Ibid.: 2
[4] Ibid.: 13
[5] Ibid.: 3

One of the main distinctions that structures self-presentation in this dramaturgical model of social interaction, is that of 'front' and 'back' regions. Regions are relative to the context in which individuals find themselves and they are 'bounded to some degree by barriers to perception'.[1] Goffman understands the *front region* as, the place 'where a particular performance is or may be in progress', and *back regions* or *backstage* being 'where action occurs that is related to the performance but inconsistent with the appearance fostered by the performance'.[2] The performance given in the front region 'may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards'.[3] It is where impression management occurs. The role of 'teams' acting on the front stage is important; examples taken from commerce, family life or politics are abundant. For instance, members of a political cabinet will agree on how to act and what to say in public in order to mask any disagreement – at least whilst in the front region. A 'back region' is defined in relation to a specific performance taking place in a 'front region'. As in the backstage of a theatre, it is where that performance is prepared, 'stage props and items can be stored', 'costumes and other parts of personal front can be adjusted', and where 'the performer can relax, drop his front, step out of his character'; thus, in the back region, 'the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course'.[4] In a restaurant, for example, a waiter might behave completely differently with the cook in the kitchen (back region) and when he appears before customers in the main dining room (front region).

Quite obviously, Goffman did not have electronic communication in mind when he developed his analysis. As Dwyer (2007) notes, 'Goffman's theory evolved from a

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[1] Ibid.: 92
[2] Ibid.: 117
[3] Ibid.: 93
[4] Ibid.: 97

longitudinal study during the 1950's in the Shetland Isles among subsistence farmers. The use of technology was not a factor in Goffman's analysis'. However, it seems that a number of elements taken from his approach could arguably apply to other contexts not foreseen by him. The mechanisms and strategies that he describes seem to be applicable beyond just face-to-face communication – co-presence or the multiplicity of cues are not an imperative for this dramaturgical view of self-presentation to be valid.

## 2.2 Self-Presentation in an Online Context

At the dawn of the World Wide Web, Hugh Miller (1995) aptly noted that electronic communication provided 'new problems and new opportunities in the presentation of the self'. He drew brief parallels between the way people try to present themselves on web pages as an acceptable person and Goffman's concepts of 'front' and 'back region', the latter allowing the individual to prepare an effective front. Miller argued that individuals have strong control over their homepages, but that there was still room for 'information about the self to be *given off* in the way people use the medium, in what they say as well as what they don't say'. He also underlined that personal websites could not adapt themselves to changing contexts and audiences, causing new sets of problems for self-presentation. Gender differences in self-presentation were also pointed out, noting that men had more homepages and disclosed more personal information than women. With the model of early homepages in mind, Miller nevertheless noted that electronic communication might not necessarily fit into what Goffman understood as communication because it lacked 'signals that inform senders that the reception is taking place, or signals that announce that a channel is sought or that a channel is open'. However, it should be noted that Goffman already took a number of examples from the media that existed at his time, in particular radio and television to illustrate his theory.

Also, one could argue that OSNs are more likely to incorporate signals which attest that communication is taking place and are therefore closer to Goffman's original definition of interaction. Moreover, it seems that the problem underlined by Miller is not so relevant when reception is generally taken for granted, as in OSNs.

It has been argued that homepages could not only be a medium for self-presentation but also an element of the creator's construction of identity.[1] Drawing a parallel with the walls of teenagers' rooms, Chandler notes that 'homepages are objects which enable their authors to think about their identity'.[2] The same author borrows the concept of *bricoleur* from Lévi-Strauss (also adopted by cultural theorists such as Dick Hebdige), to describe the way homepages are crafted. This process – limited in creativity and originality – is framed by the practices of inclusion, allusion to others, adaptation of borrowings and by the general organisation of the page. Within 'bricolage', certain elements are displayed to signify one's belonging to a particular subcultural group. In addition, early Internet-related research already pointed out two elements already present in many homepages that are particularly relevant to the study of OSNs. First, the display of connections to other people (e.g. links to friends' websites) was noted. In that respects, Turkle explained that 'one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections'[3] – such signs were seen as just another element to indicate who they are. Secondly, photos were already widely present in homepages, 'at least identifiable by those who knew them in real life'.[4] Therefore, these two elements also denote a direct connection between the homepage

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[1] Erickson (1996) quoted in Chandler (1998)
[2] Chandler (1998)
[3] Turkle (1996): 258.
[4] Chandler (1998)

and the offline life of its creator – a refutation against a total disconnection between 'real' and 'virtual' lives.

## 2.3 OSNs, self-presentation and identity-construction

More recently, studies of self-presentation and identity construction have been extended more specifically to OSNs by scholars with an interest in self-presentation and identity construction. Dwyer notes that in the case of OSNs, profiles are the central support to impression management: 'a profile on a social networking site is an opportunity to present yourself, as you really are, or as you would like to be'.[1] Research emphasises the importance of mentioning others to present oneself, which appears in a much more organised way than in early-Internet homepages. As already pointed out, one of the main features of OSNs is their function to connect 'friends' that are then listed on profiles. Because these lists are public, some scholars argue that they participate in self-presentation. In the sites that Donath and Boyd (2004) focus on (LinkedIn, Orkut, Friendster Beta), public displays of connections serve as a guarantee or as a 'signal of the reliability of one's identity claims'. They claim that 'social status, political beliefs, musical taste, etc. may be inferred from the company one keeps'.[2] Establishing parallels with social mechanisms in the physical world (name-dropping in conversations, photos displayed on one's refrigerator, simply appearing in public with someone, etc.) they show that displaying friends can be done for a multitude of reasons, often linked to impressing others. Also, 'knowing that someone is connected to people one already knows and trusts is one of the most basic ways of establishing trust with a new relationship'.[3] A mutual acquaintance, or even, being connected through a chain of people, should provide a more positive context for establishing a relationship. To assess

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[1] Dwyer (2007): 5
[2] Donath and Boyd (2004): 72
[3] Ibid.

the reliability of these lists of 'friends' as indicators of one's personality, Donath and Boyd refer to signalling theory, according to which we rely on signals in order to know something about someone that we cannot verify directly. They show that the assumptions on which the reliability of these signals are based are actually shaky. However, it could be argued that the model of online social network that these authors have in mind is oriented towards meeting new people, and would not necessarily match an OSN that predominantly connects people who already know each other from the offline world. Internet activities in which no one is accountable for one's online behaviour (e.g. chat rooms) have shaped the imagery of the early Internet; by displaying online one's connections (that are at least partly drawn from offline life), users thus become more accountable for what they say. In that sense, lists of friends appear as an additional element that separates OSNs from early models of CMC.

Certain difficulties of impression management are somewhat specific OSN profiles. Speaking of 'fixity', Marwick explains that 'profiles create conflict in user self-presentation strategies'.[1] Users only have one profile and can therefore only put one identity forward. However, their lack of 'ability to vary self-presentation based on audience' leads them to 'creative strategies in profile construction' implying, for instance, a widespread use of irony.[2] Boyd underlines that this problem is not exclusive to OSNs; she compares it with Stokely Carmichael's difficulty in dealing with radio and television. Whereas in the 1960s, the Black Power activist was able to use different rhetorical styles depending on the colour of his audience, he had no chance to succeed in reconciling the *black* and the *white* versions of his speech when speaking on the radio or television. He therefore alienated his white listeners from his message. 'There was no

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[1] Marwick (2005)
[2] Ibid.

way', Boyd argues, 'that Carmichael could successfully convey his message to both audiences'.[1]


This issue can be formulated in terms of the nature of the *context* in OSNs. Similar to the idea mentioned above is that OSNs offer no 'physical wall for context'; users necessarily lack references to be able to characterise the situation in which they find themselves whether they express themselves or receive information from others. In the physical world, 'the context in which the conversation occurs plays an active role in the conversation itself'[2]: Interpreting messages requires understanding the dynamic between conversations, bodies and other elements of the context. Boyd shows that in OSNs, 'egocentric circles of friends' have replaced groups and might therefore constitute a new audience or participate in defining a context. However, she notes that 'for many, social network sites are not a friends-only space, but they are a public space with some assumptions about the scope of that public'.[3] Therefore, Boyd defines four properties that are instrumental in helping participants structure the context: persistence, searchability, replicability (meaning that digital expressions are easily copied, searched or archived) and invisible audiences. Quite aptly she notes that contexts are also shaped by offline social life, which can make the negotiation of 'friendship' delicate.


## 3.      Privacy implications of online social networks


Research on OSNs has also concentrated on the issue of privacy, arising from the amount of data left by users on their profile. Stutzman (2006) notes that 90 percent of

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[1] Boyd (in press): 16-17
[2] Boyd (2006): 1.
[3] Ibid.:

students using OSNs disclose personal information. Gross and Acquisti (2005, 2006) suggest that this phenomenon might put users at risk of attacks online as well offline (e.g. identity theft, stalking, etc.). Basing his comments on Facebook, Stutzman emphasises the fact that students see the network as a 'students only' place, leading them to give away a lot of information (home address, phone numbers, etc.). Barnes (2006) speaks of a privacy paradox; drawing on Katz and Rice (2002) who see the Internet as a panopticon, she asserts that OSNs 'allow for high levels of surveillance'. She argues that young people freely give up information that can then be used by marketers, college officials and parents to have better control over them.

## 4.    Online social networks and social ties

Another area of focus for scholars studying OSNs has been their relation to social ties. This actually corresponds to various reflections. On the one hand, researchers have questioned the meaning of 'friendship' in social networking sites, sometimes exploring its offline implications. On the other hand, the debate about the Internet and 'social capital' has been extended to OSNs.

### 4.1 Networks of 'Friends'

Since systems of 'friends' are one of the main pillars of OSNs, a discussion of some difficulties regarding sociological approaches on friendship is necessary. Pahl (2002) pointed out that various sociologists have linked the evolution of friendship with individualisation. While Simmel thought that the modern man could only sustain 'differentiated friendship', Bauman is 'sceptical and pessimistic about the quality of

personal relationships in identity-obsessed modern society'.[1] Networks of 'friends' on OSNs could correspond to such a process, in which we would 'affirm and confirm our personal identities' by 'choos[ing] the material decorations of our 'personal spaces' and then inhabit[ing] them with the friends of our choice'.[2] However, Pahl noted the lack of evidence behind such statements and pointed out that the 'the word 'friend' is forced to do too much work'. With a more extensive definition of 'friendship' – such as one of OSNs – the real question becomes: 'what proportion of a person's friendship falls into the 'differentiated' category'? If *all* these supposed 'friends' do not correspond to pure Aristotelian 'friends of virtue', this should not necessarily mean that the quality of friendship has deteriorated.

On the same line, Boyd (2006a) confirms that some assumptions about 'friendship' on these websites are misleading. By describing every user's network as an 'egocentric circle of friends', Boyd seems to agree with the position of the 'individualists' mentioned above (Simmel, Bauman, Beck). She also challenges the idea that 'friends' on OSNs are also friends in some other context and argues that 'friending' affects the culture of these websites. While she may be right, one should stress that this culture of 'friending' actually varies from one website to the other, and also depends on the context people use it in. However, Boyd equally underlines the complexity and diversity that characterises those circles, thus not falling in the trap highlighted by Pahl.

While there is no precise sociological definition of 'friendship', it generally implies some degree of mutual affection and admiration. Boyd argues that, in the United States, people attribute a profound meaning to the term. However, it generally implies a strong hierarchy between friends, which is not reflected in OSNs. The drifting meaning of friendship on OSNs can be observed in situations such as when professors and

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[2] Ibid.: 411

students become 'friends'. At the same time, 'friendship' on OSNs shares certain features with that of offline social life; it can for example have performative qualities and, referring to Goffman, it sometimes serves to *save face*.[1] A lot of these complex implications are also due to the fact that OSNs tend to 'bridge the physical and the digital'.

## 4.2 OSNs and 'social capital'

Since the early spread of the Net, a debate has emerged over the nature of its impacts on 'social capital'.[2] At this point, it is useful to briefly underline the existence of at least two definitions of social capital which are often confused. Bourdieu defines it as a resource derived from 'the possession of a durable network of […] relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'.[3] Putnam, on the other hand, refers to social capital as 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'.[4] Whereas for Bourdieu, it is an element of distinction between individuals, Putnam emphasises the value of social capital for the society in general; it is therefore a measurement of how inclusive a society is. In this thesis, the expression 'social capital' will be used with prudence, and will generally be understood in Bourdieu's way.

According to Ellison et al. (2006), the main difference between previous online communities and OSNs is that the latter 'allow for both maintenance of existing social ties and formation of new connections'.[5] Early research assumed that the Internet was connecting people outside their pre-existing social circles, thus freeing individuals from physical location and allowing ties based on shared interests (Wellman et al. 1996). Actually, studies soon found out that offline and online interaction were more

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[1] Boyd (2006a)
[2] See Wellman & Quan-Haase (2003)
[3] Bourdieu (1986): 249
[4] Putnam (2000): 19
[5] Ellison et al. (2006): 4.

complexly interrelated; scholars focused on a number of situations in which online relations were continued offline. For instance, Rheingold (2000) reported that members of the online WELL community meet for 'real' picnics. Ellison et al. (2006) argue, however, that research has mostly focused on the *online to offline* direction, whereas the *offline to online* trend remains understudied.[1] A few studies have nevertheless analysed situations in which computer networks (OSNs or similar) linked people with some kind of previous offline connection. The 'Netville' study – based on observations of a neighbourhood in Canada in which homes were connected to a network – showed that usage of the network enhanced community and was associated with increased social capital (Hampton, 2003). Adamic et al. (2003) study what may appear as a precursor of Facebook: Club Nexus, bound to Stanford University. They observed and measured social network phenomena such as a 'small world effect'.[2] One of the key outcomes of using this network seemed to be a strengthening of weak offline ties.

Interested in the *offline to online* trend as explained above, Ellison et al. (2006) studied a 'spatially-bounded online social network' taking the example of Facebook at Michigan State University. Through a survey amongst undergraduates, they studied relations between the use of the OSN and the formation of social capital, integration into college life and psychological well-being. Ellison et al. argue that there is a strong connection between Facebook usage and indicators of social capital, and in particular, with what they call 'high school social capital'.[3] They say this suggests that online social networks help maintain relations as people move from one offline community to another, which could generate many opportunities. They also highlight that people using

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[1] Ibid.: 5.
[2] See Milgram (1972): The number of connections it takes to relate to people in a communiy or a whole society is small.
[3] By that, they mean the network of relations that one may keep from school at home, in a society in which people tend to move frequently, in particular to go to university.

OSNs are 'doing fundamentally different things than those reported in the early virtual community literature'[1] – i.e. less meeting new people than using the medium to strengthen their links with existing connections. The approach followed by these scholars is close to the one adopted in this thesis as they wished to analyse consequences of the use of Facebook on an offline network of relations. However, that study seems to suffer from some shortcomings, which this thesis will attempt to overcome.

Ellison and her colleagues ask whether Facebook users will be 'able to capitalise on the networking capacities of Facebook'.[2] Despite using the concept of 'high school social capital', the authors should only be able to conclude hypothetically to this question. Their general use of 'social capital' remains also unclear.[3] As it is generally seen as a long term resource though, it is hard to predict whether people will manage to 'capitalise on the networking capacities of Facebook' by just looking at students who are still at university. In other words, how is it possible to tell if people will manage to stay in touch with people from university thanks to Facebook, by studying people when they are at university? Although one can understand why they chose to carry out the research on undergraduates only (Facebook is most commonly used amongst them than amongst graduates), the inclusion of postgraduates – who generally represent a more diverse population especially in age – may have given more hindsight on this issue, since graduates have generally gone through more stages in life and met more people. It also seems that a purely quantitative study is not totally suited to answer these questions, since the correlations underlined by the data do not necessarily imply the causation they claim. Finally, while agreeing with them on the importance of studying

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[1] Ellison et al. (2006): 26.
[2] Ibid.: 6.
[3] Is it closer to Bourdieu's definition, or Putnam ? I.e., are they interested in the outcome of Facebook on the level of inclusion in the community, or in the building of personal social resources by individuals?

*offline to online* dynamics, one could also argue that online social networks interweave with offline social networks in a too complex manner to create a strict division between *offline to online* and vice-versa. One might rarely meet new people through Facebook, but the very presence online, of an offline network that is larger than someone's own connections, seems to create simultaneous dynamics in each direction.

## 5. Towards research questions

As discussed earlier, Internet literature tends to group together a variety of phenomena, which would deserve more careful distinctions. To some extent, the same problem arises within the literature on OSNs: the specificity of each online networking website is such that basing a sociological study on one or another may result in quite different outcomes. Small technical variations combined with differences in the context of use create distinct cultures around OSNs. For example, a website on which people choose a pseudonym and interact mainly with people they have not met offline differs considerably from one in which people are encouraged to give their real name and connect to people they already know. From the perspective of this thesis, the most significant difference is the degree of connection between the OSN and offline circles. The website under scrutiny in this thesis – Facebook – represents an online network that remains very closely linked to offline social life. The developers of Facebook fostered such links by developing software that links individuals to their institutions – especially universities – as well as to local networks.

Due to the recent appearance of OSNs, questions regarding their impact on social capital – considered as a long-term resource at the disposal of an individual – may be raised too early in their development. Therefore, it seems expedient to investigate in greater detail how OSNs such as Facebook are used, what mechanisms they generate, and what effects they have on social relations and communication amongst people of a given environment. This thesis will attempt to uncover the complex interweaving of the online and the offline world. The research question can be summarised as follows: How does the use of a particular online social network contribute to the shaping of social relations between individuals who also commonly interact with one another in an offline context? This implies asking whether the wide use of an OSN in a specific environment affects social ties. Does it impact their number? Would the same people have entered or maintained personal relationships in the absence of OSNs? Moreover, do people communicate in the same way? Are the form and content of their communication altered?

Social relations are widely conditioned by the way people perceive others, which itself relies on available representations of others; this should therefore lead us to focus on how Facebook specifically contributes to changing the way people present themselves and are represented and perceived by others. A subsidiary research question that this thesis will attempt to answer is: 'why do nearly all students in Cambridge use Facebook?'

The hypothesis, according to which Facebook affects social relations in some way, does not correspond to pure technological determinism. As expressed by Benkler, '[d]ifferent communication media differ from each other — in who gets to speak to whom and in what can be said. These differences structure the social relations that rely

on these various modes of communication so that they differ from each other in significant ways. Technological determinism is not required to accept this'.[1] Rather, the approach followed here is 'interactional' in the sense explained by John Thompson: 'by using communication media, individuals create *new* forms of action and interaction which have their own distinctive properties';[2] and it is these new properties that I wish to identify. Furthermore, by stressing the importance of the context in which this particular medium – Facebook – is used, more distance is taken with respects to simplistic determinist models. As Benkler puts it, 'some aspects of the difference among media of communication are not necessarily technical, but are rather culturally or organizationally embedded'.[3]

Recalling Miller and Slater's advice – 'If you want to get to the Internet, don't start from there'[4] – it is now important to specify where exactly this study will start from and how it will proceed.

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[1] Benkler (2006): 369.
[2] Thompson (2005): 32.
[3] Benkler (2006): 369
[4] Ibid.: 5.

# CHAPTER TWO:

# Methodology

## 1. Focus and Population

This thesis investigates the OSN Facebook. There are various reasons for this choice. Facebook seemed particularly appropriate for this piece of research because of its apparent complex relations with offline life and networks. With at least 1.3 million users, it is one of the most popular OSNs in Britain.[1] Moreover, Facebook membership is particularly common amongst the selected population, in which it is by far the most widely used – as this study confirmed.

This study was conducted in Cambridge and included only students of Cambridge University, United Kingdom. This restriction was partly due to constraints of time and resources: the study had to be completed within approximately three months from commencement and gaining access to many institutions requires considerable time and contacts. Thus, being based in Cambridge facilitated direct access to people, information and institutions. Many factors may negatively affect the generalisability of the findings to the society in general, or even to student campuses. The population mainly consists of a narrow age group – young adults. Life on a campus and the organisation of social relations within it tend to differ considerably from other contexts. Furthermore, the University of Cambridge is unlikely to be representative of all institutes of higher education, even within the UK. It is often viewed as an elite

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[1] Geist (2007).

institution; the organisation of the university and the campus are very particular; and both students' study time and free time are structured in a specific way.

Nevertheless, choosing this focus was partly intentional since it meets the research objectives and theoretical stance previously outlined. Choosing one specific spatially bounded place with a dense community aimed to facilitate the analysis of the complex relations between offline relations and what happens online. One of my hypotheses – which was an additional reason for the study to be based within a rather tightly-knit community – is that online social networks thrive in environments where they 'compete' with other forms of communication. Users tend 'to assimilate yet another medium into various practices',[1] such as using telephones or e-mails, to communicate with each other. Furthermore, Facebook.com actually started as a small Internet network amongst students of Harvard University before it extended to all Ivy League institutions. In the UK, it was originally accessible only to Cambridge and Oxford students. Despite its later expansion to the general public, a certain idea of exclusiveness and of a system of privileged contacts between people from the same institution has certainly remained. Finally, the fact that Cambridge is in many regards a competitive place made it all the more relevant for this study.

## 2. Research Design: Methods, Samples and Analysis

This study used elements of both quantitative and qualitative enquiry, with an emphasis on the latter. Triangulation – defined by Denzin as "the combination of methodologies

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[1] Miller & Slater: 6.

in the study of the same phenomenon"[1] – was pursued in an effort to provide both complementary information and increase the validity and reliability of certain results. The two main methods took the form of semi-structured interviews and a web-based survey.

## 2.1 Interviews

The aim of the interviews was essentially to gain deeper understanding of people's perceptions and motivations regarding their use of Facebook and its relationship to the rest of their life. The basis of semi-structured interviews provided a replicable framework while still allowing a better understanding of the subject's point of view. Fifteen interviews with students were conducted in Cambridge from March to May 2007. Interviewees were asked different categories of questions. One part of the interviews covered how they used Facebook, that is: what use they made of the social networking site – what features they used, who they communicated with, what their privacy settings were – and in what circumstances – how much they used it, when and where, etc. A second group of questions dealt with their perceptions towards others on Facebook, and their feelings about Facebook in general – what they liked or disliked about it. Another set concerned the interviewees' background and social life in general – origin, studies, personality, etc. Subjects were encouraged to provide their own thoughts on issues not covered by me or expand on any issue they wanted at any point in the interview. Most sessions were conducted beside a computer, which sometimes gave interviewees the possibility to show their Facebook profile and provide more accurate answers about it. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour.

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[1] Denzin (1978): 291.

The sample of students was contacted through various channels, with the aim to be diverse enough and to match the key ratios (sex, graduate/undergraduate, nationality/origin, subject and college) of the Cambridge University student population. One should emphasise at this point that the university is composed of 31 different colleges, which provide students with non-academic services (housing, dining, social activities, sports, etc.) as well as some academic training in the case of undergraduate students. In this sense, colleges influence a number of aspects of students' social life. To some extent, colleges also confer identity on students[1]. Hence the attention that is paid to diversifying college-membership in this study – especially choosing students from colleges of different sizes. Compared to the general university population,[2] the sample for the interviews over represented students of arts (n=5), and social sciences (n=6), while scientists (n=4) were under represented.[3] There were seven women and eight men, matching the gender ratio of the university. The balance between Home/EU and overseas students was also respected (roughly 80 vs. 20 percent) although it is regrettable that the university does not provide more detailed figures about the origin of students, and that the sample was essentially composed from the European Union and the United States. The fifteen interviewees were members of six different colleges. Although this sample did not meet the ratios within the university with absolute precision, it appears to be a valid selection, especially since it includes a diversity of subjects.

The interviews were conducted before the survey was sent out, thus also serving as a sort of pilot for the survey, influencing its final structure and the inclusion of

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[1] When two people meet in Cambridge, one of the most frequent questions that they ask each other is: 'what college are you in?'

[2] Based on "Facts and Figures 2006", giving information about the year 2004-2005.

[3] See appendices 1 and 2 respectively for distribution of students of the university and of the sample.

additional questions. The rather realist perspective adopted in this study led to focus on the content of answers as such to capture reality. As a consequence of this approach, most – though not *all* – of the interview material was transcribed. Still, some critical distance was taken with respects to certain interviewees' answers. Some of them betrayed a lack of sincerity due to personal embarrassment, for example. Sometimes contradictions emerged from interviewees' responses, which demanded reinterpretations and carefulness in treating such material. Key themes were identified through the interview material, which was then classified accordingly.

## 2.2 Survey

One of the purposes of the quantitative part of the investigation was to reach a greater number of people than would have been possible with qualitative procedures only, and thus to increase the reliability of the study. The survey served to obtain basic data on the use of Facebook in Cambridge and to test hypotheses on possible relationships between the use of Facebook and other parts of the individuals' life. The following types of measures were included: First, a series of variables attempted to measure people's use of Facebook: it distinguished between Facebook users and non-users (also creating a third category for former users who had 'given up' Facebook); concerning users, some variables aimed to assess the quantity and the type of Facebook usage (e.g. frequency of use, favourite features, profile details, privacy settings). Another set of measurements evaluated the connections between human relationships on Facebook and those in offline social life (e.g. who their 'Facebook friends' are; whether they communicate with them by other means, etc.). Other variables attempted to gauge how Facebook is perceived (e.g., how important participants consider it for themselves; how central they

think it is to life in Cambridge), and how respondents would perceive others on Facebook (e.g., to what extent they judge someone according to his/her profile). Finally, all respondents were asked for demographic information (age, sex, nationality, etc.), information about their social life, as well as a brief self-assessment of certain personality traits and social integration. At the end of the web-survey, a free text-box gave participants the opportunity to leave comments.

The survey was designed and distributed through a specialist website.[1] The advantages of using a self-administered web-survey in this study were numerous. Most problems normally raised by electronic surveys and reported in the methodology literature do not apply in the specific environment of the university. Everyone in the population – and therefore in any sample drawn from it – has a registered e-mail account that they should normally check regularly, thus eliminating bias caused by differential Internet-access. The fact that the survey was self-administered may have also made people feel at ease and therefore more honest than during face-to-face interviews. While most questions did not cover very intimate issues, Facebook may sometimes be considered as something shallow, especially in an intellectual environment such as Cambridge. The distance between the researcher and respondents provided by the survey avoided such problems and some responses may therefore be considered as more valid than those obtained in the interviews.

The absence of a full list of all students of the university, however, did not allow a random sample because of the absence of a sampling frame. Therefore, a non-probability sample was drawn that was as close as possible to a quota sample of the population, aiming to respect certain characteristics of the general population. Four

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[1] Formsite.com

colleges were selected (Girton, Gonville & Caius, Magdalene and Trinity), which put together, reflected as much as possible the key ratios mentioned earlier (sex, undergraduate/graduate, subjects, etc.). Contact was established with the undergraduate and graduate representatives of these colleges and a link to the survey was included in the weekly graduate and undergraduate newsletters of each of these colleges. An optional entry into a prize draw was offered to encourage participation. Between the 6th and the 12th May 2007, 517 of the 4038 students who should have received the email responded to the survey, but 77 responses were excluded as they were incomplete. This corresponds to a response rate of 12.8 percent – which was higher than expected for a web-survey received through an e-newsletter during exam time. The sample included a short majority of female respondents (56 vs. 44 percent). The ratio of undergraduate vs. graduate was consistent with Cambridge University representation (2/3 vs. 1/3). Proportions of respondents studying arts, sciences and social sciences were also close to those of the university at large, although the latter was slightly underrepresented. Ratios of nationalities were also met quite closely, although UK students were slightly over-represented.[1]

The data collected was analysed mainly with SPSS,[2] and occasionally with the statistical tools provided by Formsite and with Excel. The comments left by survey respondents on the free space provided – about forty messages – were treated as qualitative data.

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[1] See Appendix 3 for figures.
[2] Statistical Package for Social Sciences

## 2.3 Additional methods

A few tools made available by Facebook itself were also used. Each Facebook network, such as the Cambridge network, has its own 'homepage' featuring collective information and statistics about its members. This has been occasionally used to get hold of specific figures about Facebook users in Cambridge. Through this page, it is also possible to obtain random samples of members of the Cambridge network by using the 'browse' function; this facilitated the calculation of some statistics concerning users' profiles and privacy settings, as well as triangulating such information with that generated from the survey. The small amount of information obtained directly through Facebook was always used as aggregate data, always respecting the anonymity of users.

Finally, a certain technique was used to verify the accuracy of survey information concerning the proportion of students being registered on the online network. When names are entered onto Facebook, one can see whether the person is a registered user. A sample of students from one of the colleges was therefore drawn, each name being entered onto the website, which allowed determining the percentage of registered users in the population of that college.

## 3. Other source of bias

For both the qualitative and the quantitative part of the analysis, the major source of sample bias could stem from voluntary response or non-response, which 'is such a pervasive problem that it may be expected to introduce bias into any survey using it'.[1] The small proportion of people who accept to fill out the survey may over-represent those who have a special interest in Facebook. This may also be the case concerning people who accepted to participate in an interview, which is even more time-consuming.

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[11] Bryson (1976)

However, when triangulation of survey data with results obtained with other methods was possible, it showed similar results, indicating that such bias was lower than expected.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Online and Offline Networks Intertwined: Facebook, Social Life and 'Real' Social Ties

'I thought it through for a long time before I joined. I was quite reluctant to join, but when I came to Cambridge, Facebook was everywhere.'

Graduate student

In little time, Facebook has become a major communication medium in Cambridge. Most students – about 90 percent of them – are registered on Facebook.[1] A great majority also believes that Facebook has become an important phenomenon within student life in Cambridge.[2] Given that environment, the question raised in this chapter is that of Facebook's relationship with the offline world and of its possible impacts on social ties. The view that takes for granted the existence of a 'cyberspace' that would exist independently from reality and follow a whole set of distinct properties has been criticised in the first chapter of this thesis. However, making the opposite assumption could appear equally wrong if it were not supported by precise data. In this chapter, empirical evidence will be used to support the argument that Facebook is embedded in a local space and is heavily dependent on networks of people that are also connected outside Facebook.

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[1] According to the other method used to determine the proportion of Facebook users (as previously explained), 88.4 percent of the members of one college were found to use Facebook. This is slightly lower, though very much comparable to that of the survey, as shown in Figure 1.

[2] Appendix 4

**Do you use Facebook?**

**Figure 1**       Use of Facebook amongst Cambridge University students
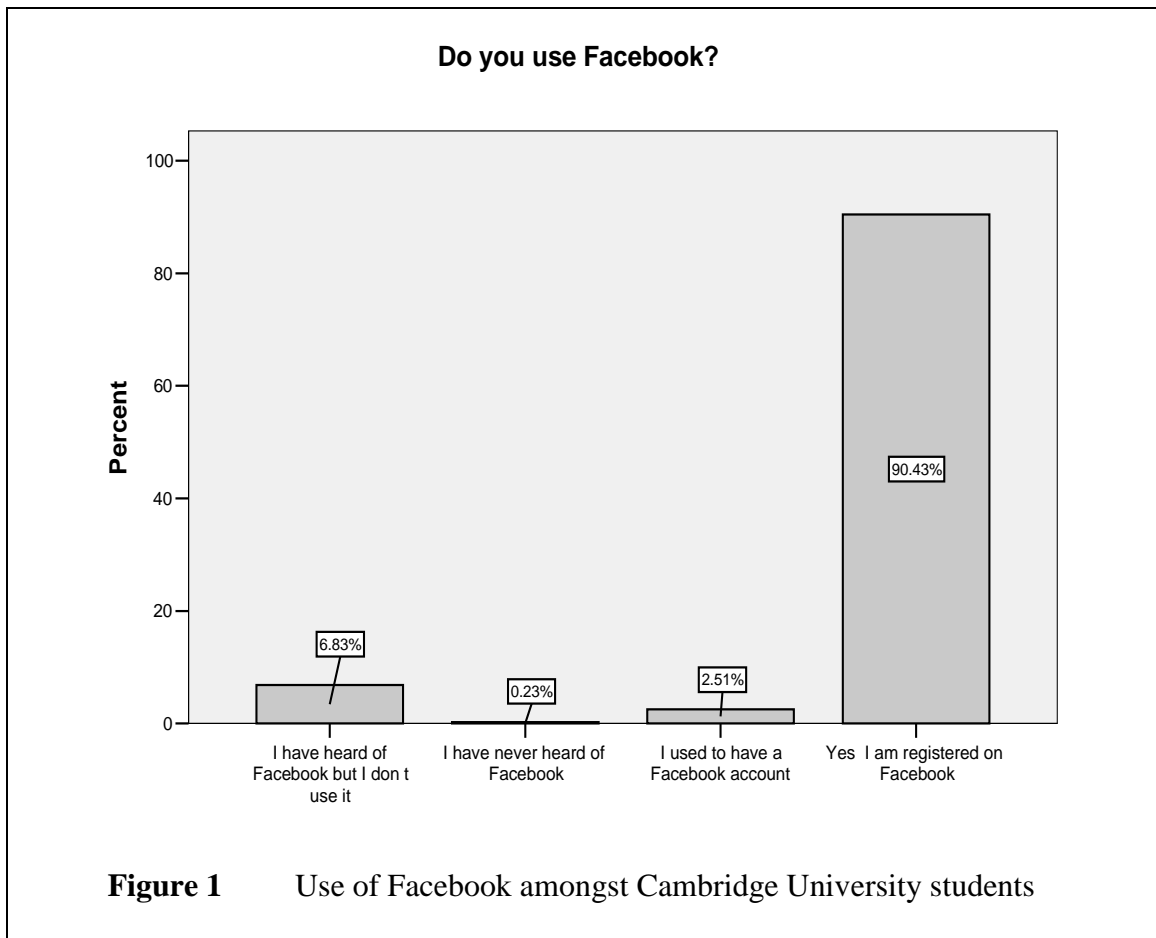
In studying the relation between Facebook and offline social ties, this chapter will also attempt to determine whether Facebook actually corresponds to 'social software' or whether it actually diverts people from 'real' social life.

## 1.      The deep interweaving of Facebook and offline networks

### 1.1 An online network rooted in Cambridge

While it is true that Facebook, as well as the Internet in general, can connect at no cost people who are distant, it appears in our case that it actually joins primarily those that share the same locale. The architecture of Facebook, based on the idea that every institution or locality (region or city) forms a network, also participates in making users

who belong to the same entity closer. Users are allowed to view profiles of members of the same network, unless these have restricted their privacy settings. However, students in Cambridge generally do not restrict those settings: about 83 percent of them allow all students of the university to view their profile even if they are not 'friends'.[1] Although Facebook serves as a platform for people to connect with others they know from various places (as explained later), students of the university also tend to have more Facebook friends in Cambridge than outside.[2] Another reason why Facebook is associated with Cambridge is that the students' arrival at the university often coincides with their opening a Facebook account. While less than 8 percent of users reported using Facebook prior to Cambridge,[3] registering on the OSN almost appears as a rite of initiation for freshers, as many interviewees explained. For some of them, this corresponds to a 'transfer' from a different OSN to Facebook, in order to share the same OSN as their new university companions. For other students, in particular graduates, interviews seem to indicate that there is more 'resistance' to join Facebook, which generally still happens within a few months after arriving at Cambridge.

It is also important to note that people generally do not use Facebook to meet new people but to connect to those they have previously met offline, as shown in Figure 2. In this respects, qualitative data also points out that students only like to include in their 'friends' people that they actually know. A great portion of users actually prefer to 'add as friends' people that they have at least met more than once, and that they feel properly acquainted. Speaking of people who request to be your friend when you actually don't know them, an interviewee explains: 'It's ridiculous because then it becomes a fiction and you think they're friends but they're people you don't even know'. Although people can technically see profiles of people they do not know in Cambridge, this seems to be a

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[1] Appendix 6
[2] Appendix 7
[3] Appendix 8

**Figure 2**        Have you ever met somebody new through Facebook?
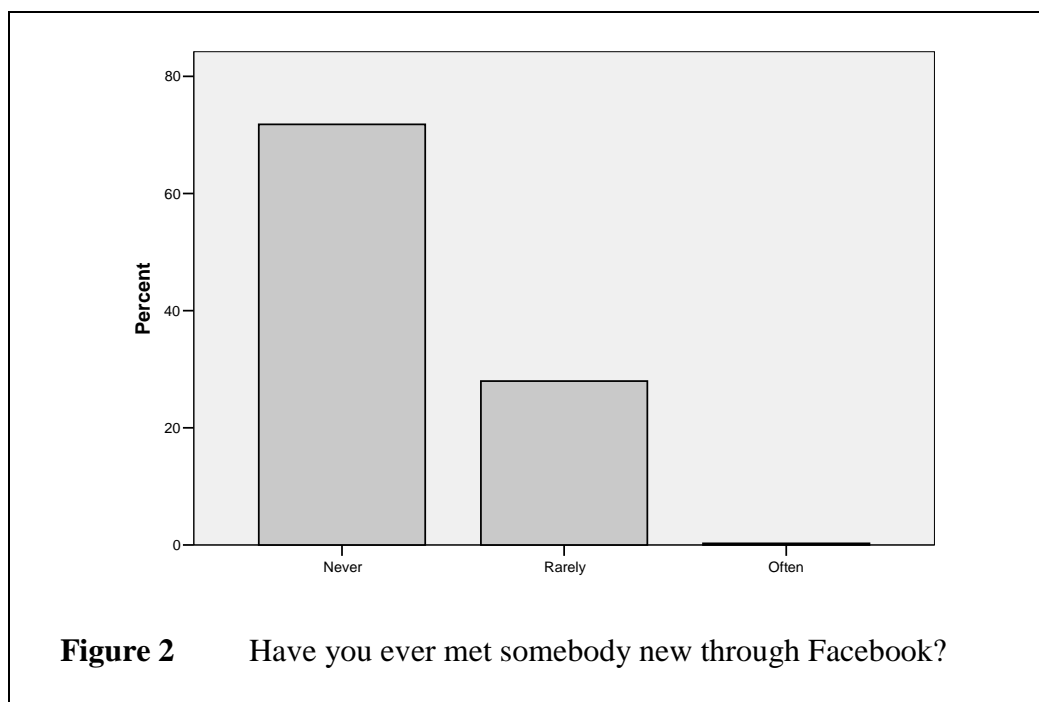
much less popular activity. Figure 3 also indicates that, on average, the less people know somebody, the less they enjoy looking at their profiles. This would also tend to argue against the 'virtual' character of Facebook. In that context, norms and codes on Facebook are essentially derived from basic rules of offline life. At least, they are very much conditioned by the fact that those one relates to online are people that one has really met and is likely to see again. 'I don't really reject anyone because it seems like a social *faux pas*', explains an interviewee. In our case, the culture of 'friending' that Boyd (2006a) refers to is thus different than that reported by that scholar for other OSNs.

| | |
|---|---|
| Looking at Friends' profiles | 7.0 |
| Looking at profiles of people you've met but you don't know well | 5.9 |
| Looking at profiles of people you don't know | 3.8 |
| **Figure 3**    How much do you like doing the following activities? (Average scores from 1 to 10) | |

While agreeing with her on the fact that friends on OSN are not just one's 'closest buddies', the case under scrutiny here shows a more restricted idea of who somebody's Facebook friends should be. 'Friending' in the present context is generally framed by two factors: having met the person in real life and common rules of politeness leading people to accept as 'friends' people they have actually met. Boyd actually suspected that studies of OSNs in different contexts than the one she looked at would reveal different dynamics than those she underlined.[1] This does not only concern the way people 'befriend' others. For instance, it seems that attitudes towards privacy on OSNs might be somewhat rooted in the culture in which it is used. Even though there is no absolute evidence for that, some interviewees having used Facebook in the United States reported that people there 'thought they had nothing to hide' and thus 'posted more personal things on Facebook'. In any case, these elements suggest that, to a certain extent, the practice of Facebook is embedded in a local culture and a 'real' community.

## 1.2 Reflection and elaboration of social life on Facebook

Another manifestation of the association between Facebook and Cambridge is the dependency of the OSN on social life in Cambridge. Despite having probably more time during holidays, students tend to use it more during term time – when all students are in Cambridge – rather than outside term – when many of them are at home. As Appendix 9  shows, the proportion of frequent and very frequent users drops from over 90 percent during term time to about 57 percent outside term; on the contrary, the percentage of occasional users grows from 8 percent during term time to over 41 percent outside term. One of the reasons for that is that Facebook is 'fuelled' by student life. This can be observed in different ways. One notable elements is that students' 'institutions' – clubs,

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[1] In particular, Boyd (2006a) expected the use of OSNs outside in a 'non-American' context to be different.

societies, JCRs and MCRs (the undergraduate and graduate student bodies of every college) – have their own reflection on Facebook, generally under the form of a Facebook 'group'. Even students who do not use 'groups' much are usually part of those Facebook groups that are direct emanations of real groups. An older graduate student for example explains: 'I'm a member of very few groups, maybe just four or five, and just when someone has invited me to join them. I never search them or anything. One of them is Cambridge Gates Scholars, one is my own college MCR group, etc.' Facebook groups sometimes share features with their offline counterpart. In particular, access to social groups can be more or less open to others; on Facebook, the degree of 'openness' of a group can be decided by its creator by adjusting the privacy settings. A rower explained: 'We have a 'first boat' group that we use a lot to coordinate outings, to upload dodgy photos we don't want anyone to see, and for general banter. That's a *private* group. And it's the only one I frequent a lot'. In this case, the right of entry to the 'first boat' (the best one) is very strict, which is transferred to the Facebook group. By making this group private, rowers of the first boat also keep certain secrets – such as comments or photographs – for themselves, which is a distinctive feature of their group, both offline and online. This interviewee also says that he has twelve trainings a week as well as numerous dinners and parties with his rowing mates, meaning that the very regular visits he pays to that Facebook group match his general social life.

As this last example may have already hinted, stories, events, photographs etc. that stem from social life are also what make Facebook run. All kinds of photos are on Facebook, but a majority of them are from parties in Cambridge or events that involve other people who know each other well and are also Facebook friends. They play a

crucial part in extending collective experiences online. Explaining what often happens after nights out in Cambridge, an undergraduate says:

> 'You don't feel at your best, and then you just go on Facebook and you see all the people who've put some pictures in there, and it's as if the night continued. You look at it and laugh at yourself and at other people. It continues the night.'

Facebook thus borrows from social life, but we shall argue that social life has now become very much dependent on Facebook too. Not being on Facebook would mean, missing that field of social life that has been continued online. Social life needs Facebook. The following comment left by a survey respondent exemplifies such dependency of social life on Facebook, as if an event were fully experienced only if one were able to enjoy its Facebook extension:

> 'I have left Facebook three times, but I have always reactivated my profile in the end because I wanted to look at pictures that people had put up of events that I had been involved in!'

A frequently described habit consists in checking albums of events that they have missed so that they have in order to assess the occasion and see photographs of their friends. These mediated experiences, however, do not seem to happen at the expense of 'real' social life, as it will be explained later. Such activities suggest that Facebook is not only a mirror that reflects social life, but that social life is also partly elaborated through Facebook. The way in which students upload photographs, 'tag'

people's names on them, communicate publicly with others on 'walls'[1] etc. illustrates how social interaction goes *back and forth* from offline to Facebook, and most of the time, back to offline life. An interviewee illustrated such a process in the following way:

> 'When I take photos at a worthwhile event, the first thing I'll do is just put them on Facebook. And then you go and see the photos you've been tagged on. So I both upload photos and watch photos. Also, I watch photos of my friends and see how they're doing, and sometimes leave a little comment.'

Such online-offline elaboration of social life will now be explored with more detail through two key dimensions that show the reciprocal needs of Facebook and the life of the community.

## 1.3 Online-offline Gossiping

> 'If a girl did something with another guy the night before, I might draw attention to this subtly on their walls.'

> Undergraduate student

Thompson (2000) defined gossip as 'a form of talk that takes place between friends or acquaintances. It is often small talk, idle chat about other people who are not themselves party to the conversation, or about relatively trivial matters'.[2] He also affirmed that 'gossip is an activity through which social relationships are continuously reaffirmed and

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[1] Walls are the part of each user's profile on which the user's friends can write messages, which are then visible to anyone who checks the profile. Others can not only look at messages written by someone, but also follow the whole history of a conversation between two users by looking at their 'wall-to-wall'.
[2] Thompson (2000): 25

reworked, and through which bonds of trust are renewed and transformed'.[1] Qualitative data reveals that Facebook is used in a similar way. Interviewees often referred to the type of communication they would have on Facebook as 'chit-chat', 'small talk' or 'banter' based on elements taken from social life. Gossip presupposes some level of shared knowledge about the subject, and to some degree, of trust and confidence. On Facebook, it is typically nurtured by reciprocal exchanges between what happens offline and what appears and is said on Facebook. For instance, photographs are obviously taken from offline life, but they gain publicity online, also allowing anyone in a wide social circle to post comments on them. Nevertheless, gossip seldom remains online and most of the time goes back to offline life, encouraged by the publicity of images and comments on Facebook. Qualitative data also points out that discussions about content on Facebook occupy a large part of people's conversations offline too. Interviewees reported that a number of photos on Facebook capture people in compromising situations, often resulting in comments, both online and offline. Thompson (1995, 2000, 2005) has emphasised the role of communication media in changing the nature of visibility and in modifying relations between public and private life. In our case, the degree of publicity that Facebook allows has increased the visibility of a number of random situations that would have otherwise remained private, and whose propagation would have only depended on limited word of mouth. With Facebook, a more systematic diffusion of people's illustrated stories takes place. One essential element in this respect is the 'news-feeds',[2] which provide a sort of digest of what has 'happened'

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[1] Ibid: 26

[2] 'News-feeds' appear on the first page when a user logs on to Facebook. They report selected 'news' about the user's Facebook friends (e.g. X and Y are now 'friends'; X has been tagged on a photo; X left a comment on Y's wall; Z is no longer in a relationship; X, Y and Z are attending such event on Saturday etc.). Users can customise their news-feeds in order to be informed more systematically about certain 'friends' and select the type of information in which they are more interested. See Appendix 20.

within one's circle of friends. News-feeds can thus be viewed as something in between a local gazette and a gossip magazine, tailored to one's large circle of 'friends'.

Two distinct points made by Thompson (2000) are that gossip relies on social networks and that gossip can be mediated, either via one-to-one communication (e.g. telephone) or via 'mass communication' (e.g. magazines, television programmes etc.).[1] With the advent of OSNs, these two propositions seem to fuse into one, giving birth to a new type of many-to-many (though not 'mass') mediated gossip within social networks. This form of commenting on social life has distinct characteristics. Most notably, it 'rationalises' traditional gossip by spreading it more systematically and by being customised to one's relations – the user is informed about those he or she wants to hear about. Similarly to gossip diffused by mass media, it is also more documented. As a consequence, it seems harder for somebody not to be the subject of such form of gossip, since to some extent, student social life is placed under a constant spotlight.[2] However, the individuals gossiped about on Facebook are not celebrities, with whom people have a 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance',[3] but on the contrary, Facebook 'friends' with whom one is acquainted in some way, and who can reply directly to whatever is said to them. Several students explained how they would leave comments under embarrassing photographs of somebody, who would then publicly reply generally in a humorous manner. Relations between Facebook 'friends' – who range from acquaintances to close friends – are thus maintained and reworked through these practices.

The point here is to show how Facebook and social life are interwoven in an intricate way, and in particular, how social life now relies considerably on Facebook,

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[1] Thompson (2000): 26
[2] This should be nuanced, of course, as not *all* social life is reflected on Facebook. Nevertheless, what is normally an attribute of celebrity, begins to apply to normal students.
[3] Thompson (2000): 27

which may participate in changing social relations. Further analysis of such publicity will be carried out in the next chapter of this thesis, where the importance of representations of the self on Facebook will be discussed.

## 1.4 A Social Life Organiser and 'Rationaliser'

Another sign of such interdependence between Facebook and social life lies in the fact that the OSN it supports, in some sense, their social life, as qualitative data show. Facebook appears increasingly as a tool to organise student life in Cambridge, whether it is to manage one's own schedule or to set up any get-togethers. When someone organises any type of event or party, a natural step is to establish a 'Facebook Event' in order to give it some visibility. One member of the Cambridge University Students' Union attests: 'Here at CUSU, if there is an event, we normally create a Facebook Event'. Even at a lower scale, gatherings are often on Facebook too. Another student explains that 'using Facebook to organise events or small meetings is very common here in Cambridge'. Thanks to those, users can also see who is planning to attend the event and who is not and they can post comments or questions on the Event's wall. In some way, Facebook is often considered as the most reliable way to publicise parties or other gatherings. One might therefore be *de facto* excluded from social life if not on Facebook, as the following student explained:

'Before I joined, it has happened that people organised a birthday party for example and would say: "I haven't told you? Oh, but I had put it on Facebook…" And for the people I know at my college who aren't on Facebook, I have to let them know separately and text them.'

Although there is no strong evidence that people actually use Facebook as their primary social calendar, a feature called 'Social Timeline' allows users to check what forthcoming parties they are planning to attend. As in the 'outdated' Filofax, Facebook not only acts as a diary or planner, but also as a 'really advanced address book', as an interviewee asserts, in which all information is directly updated.

Since Facebook is so intertwined with social life and offline social relations, one understands better, in general, why there are no such things as 'virtual' life on Facebook. Without necessarily being close friends, the people with whom one communicates through Facebook are almost always people one has previously met in real life. One should thus ask whether the strong presence of Facebook, on which social life is partly elaborated, has any effect on offline life and ties.

## 2. Facebook and Social ties

Facebook and social life have thus reached significant interdependence. In that sense, Facebook is 'social software', as OSNs are often referred to. However, this does not tell what effects Facebook has on social ties and on people's involvement in social life. The view that online activities are just an additional distraction that diverts people from true social interaction is quite common (e.g. Nie & Erbring 2002; Kraut et al. 1998), whereas others argue that the Internet has a positive effect on social life. It was pointed out earlier that time spent on the Internet is heterogeneous, making it hard to speak about the impact of the Internet as a whole on social life and ties. In our context, is there a way to determine the more specific effects of the use of Facebook on social ties and

on the involvement of people in social life? According to Wellman and his colleagues, claims that the Internet has negative effects on sociality generally rely on three different arguments: online interaction is considered as 'inherently inferior to face-to-face contact and even phone interaction; as an activity, the Internet 'competes for time' with other occupations in a twenty-four hour day, so time is spent on the Internet at the expense of more social activities; and the Internet can be 'a stressor that depresses and alienates people them from true interaction'.[1] Can Facebook be a valid target for such criticisms?

## 2.1 Facebook: A diverter from social life?

A majority of interviewees say that Facebook is 'addictive' when asked about its negative aspects. Responses to 'addictive' and 'time-consuming' averaged 7.1/10 and 7.2/10 respectively. If one understands addiction as a recurring compulsion for an individual to engage in some specific activity, it could be said a portion of users are addicted. A few interviewees described how checking Facebook is a sort of obsessive activity for them, which they repeat a considerable number of times a day. Nearly all survey respondents falling under the category of former users explained that they had 'given up' Facebook because they wasted too much time with it. It is hard to quantify time spent on Facebook: many students described how they generally leave a Facebook window open while they are doing something else on a computer, interrupting their other activity every now and then to 'check Facebook'. As Figure 4 shows, a small group of students tend to check their account more than five times a day and nearly half the respondents do so more than twice a day. Over 80 percent do it daily. A few students explained how they tended to spend a lot of time without really knowing what they were doing on Facebook, 'absent-mindedly browsing'. Time spent using Facebook

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[1] Wellman et al. (2001): 2-3

**Figure 4**  Frequency of Facebook use
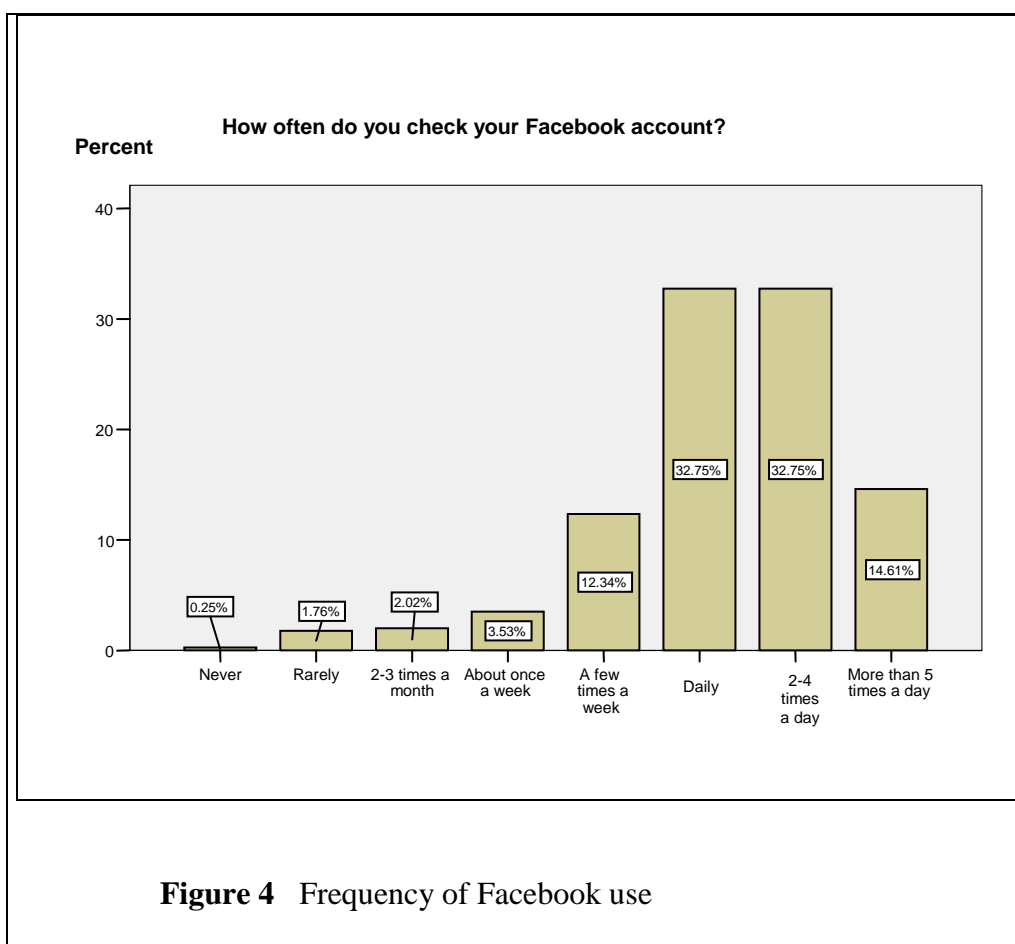
could thus be detrimental to more social activities. Many students also seemed to link their use of Facebook to boredom, turning to the online network when they do not know what else to do. In that sense, using Facebook appears as a pastime similar to watching television. As a graduate student puts it, however, 'if Facebook didn't exist, I would waste my time on other things like TV, as I used to do before the Internet was so present'. If so, using Facebook so much should not necessarily correspond to less time spent socialising with people but to less time on another 'procrastination tool', a periphrasis for Facebook in the mouth of some interviewees. Also, many students explained how they went through a period in which they used Facebook in such way, before getting bored of it and having a more purposeful use.

## 2.2 Facebook users as a 'social crowd'

In fact, there seems to be enough evidence to show that Facebook does not to produce a 'lonely crowd'.[1] Although users and non-users describe themselves as almost equally sociable,[2] students who use Facebook tend to feel more integrated in the Cambridge social life than those who do not, as shown in Figure 5. Users describe themselves as more formally involved in clubs, societies or college JCRs and MCRs with an average of 5.9/10 for users, compared with 4.8/10 for non-users. Such a difference could be explained by the fact that undergraduates tend to be more involved in student life as well as more on Facebook. However, even controlling for undergraduate/graduate differences, Facebook users are still more formally involved in clubs and societies than non-users.[3]



**Figure 5**    Facebook use, social integration and formal social involvement

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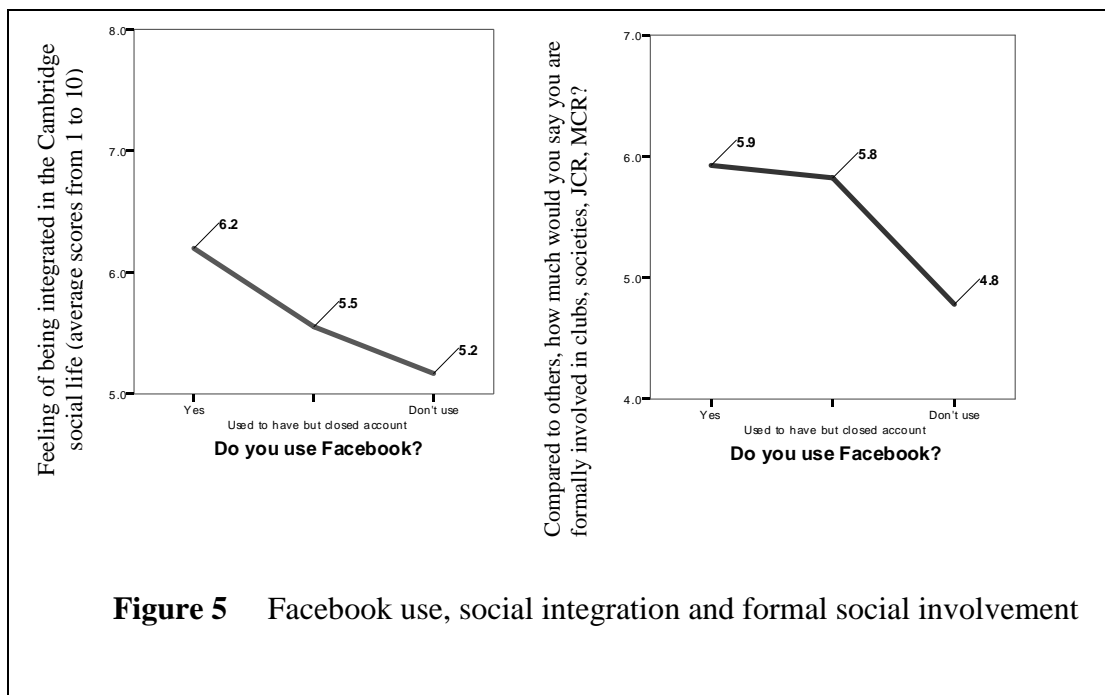
[1] Expression used by Nie & Erbring (2000) to describe the social consequences of the Internet.
[2] See Appendix 13
[3] See Appendix 14

Since these are averages, another possibility could be that Facebook use becomes anti-social for those who use it a lot. However, a regression shows that the only weak, but significant positive correlation in that respect, is that between frequency of checking Facebook and feeling of integration in social life in Cambridge.[1] These findings somehow contradict the conclusions of previous studies that showed that more time spent on the Internet corresponded to having fewer friends (e.g. Franzen, 2000).

Nevertheless, these quantitative results do not allow establishing direct causation between Facebook use and integrations or involvement in social life. Facebook might just attract people who are more integrated in social life or who are more involved in societies and clubs. As shown in the first section of this chapter, offline social life is elaborated and coordinated on Facebook in such way that students who are socially active would find it difficult not to be on Facebook, and even, not to check their account quite often. In that sense, these results essentially confirm that Facebook is indeed embedded in offline social life and relations. This does not tell us, however, whether Facebook enhances social life and community involvement in general, and whether it actually connects people in some way that really adds to what existed before. It is therefore important see if Facebook can actually supplement bonding in some way.

**2.3 Facebook as new social glue for 'fringe relationships'**

One fact on which students generally concur regards how Facebook results in having more contact with acquaintances with which they would otherwise have little or no contact at all. Research has already shown how e-mail has allowed people to maintain

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[1] See Appendix 15

contact with weaker relations. Facebook seems to observe a similar, though stronger effect.

As interviews showed, people tend to 'add each other as friends' after meeting once or twice. A student describes that, 'if you meet someone at some *formal swap*[1] in Cambridge, for example, it's very routine that you get added on Facebook, and then you might have a chat with them. Whereas if you didn't have Facebook, you probably wouldn't have any communication with them.' In many cases, occasions for those people to remain in contact would be rare and the connection between them would be too weak for an exchange of phone numbers or email address. Furthermore, exchanging contact details generally implies a direct reason for those people to maintain contact – e.g. meeting again shortly after, exchanging information, organising a date etc. – whereas Facebook allows remaining informally connected, without the necessity of a having a purpose to it. Since it permits to search people by their name without having any other piece of information, no formality is involved offline to stay in contact with that person, which may otherwise constitute a barrier to staying touch. To some extent, Facebook also works retroactively, allowing old ties that had been broken to be reconstituted. For instance, a student explained: 'Some friends back home who weren't my closest friends can say: 'oh, if you're back this weekend, you should come to this''. Thus, Facebook allows 'storing' all relations established at some point throughout experiences both in Cambridge and outside.

Once connected through Facebook, people stay in touch more or less closely, but establishing communication never seems too complicated. As a student put it:

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[1] Exchange between two Cambridge colleges for formal dinners.

'Email has turned into the traditional letter style, and Facebook has now become the new email'. The two following examples also illustrate the different degree of formality that people attribute to Facebook communication compared to e-mail.

> 'For example, I went on a gap year, and I collected 50 or 100 e-mail addresses, but then it's sort of an effort to sit down and write an email. But with Facebook if they contact you, you can just write straight back. It's just easy because it's so informal.'

> 'So after two or three years, if you haven't seen someone, you should send a three-page letter and you don't want to send a one-line e-mail. But you don't find enough time to write that letter, so you never contact them, and you feel really guilty but you can't be asked to do anything. Whereas with Facebook, you just say 'hi, how are you?''

Two principles seem to come into play in order to let informality act upon weak ties. Firstly, Facebook allows a certain number of weak ties to become stronger. Over half of users declare that Facebook has already made them see someone that they would otherwise probably never have met again.[1] Wall posts are often used by students to communicate with others they do not feel close enough to call for a chat. Establishing and/or maintaining communication with someone one is not extremely close to is easier on Facebook than by using any other method; and those contacted may feel that the person is interested in him or her, thus creating a positive dynamics. A similar view is exposed by an interviewee:

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[1] Appendix 16

'I think that when people go on Facebook and see a message from someone, they feel that they're being communicated to, being talked to, so they feel a closer bond to that person; they feel cared about. So they say: 'let's do something together''.

The second principle through which Facebook acts on weak ties could be referred to as *dormant connections*. By adding people as friends over time, people accumulate contacts with which they maintain very loose and occasional communication or do not necessarily communicate. Nevertheless, the informality that characterises communication on Facebook authorises users to reach such contacts more easily than they used to be able to. Though weak, these contacts remain available for potential use. Also, Facebook gives the possibility to have access to information about that person and follow at any point what he or she is doing, as it will be further explained in the next chapter. In a certain way, then, these ties are the most cost-effective, since they require little effort but can potentially reward those who have them. If '[t]he volume of social capital possessed by a given agent [...] depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilise', then having a great number of such *dormant connections* that one can revive on demand should lead to an increase of social capital.[1] Although long-term consequences are hard to establish with certainty, Facebook thus seems to create new networking possibilities and generate social capital understood in Bourdieu's sense. Leaving the university setting might however recreate some barriers over time, limiting the possibility to revive those *dormant connections* so informally and easily.

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[1] Bourdieu (1986): 249

This chapter has emphasised the interdependence between Facebook and offline social life. In particular, it has shown that the elaboration of social life relies increasingly on Facebook. It has also pointed out that Facebook enables its users to relate to more people than they used to, some of which remain weak ties, and others become stronger. These relations are drawn from offline life but the online network allows them to be sustained. Additionally, members of the Cambridge network have access to profiles of a great majority of students of the university. The context is thus set to analyse the importance of the representation of people on Facebook, and its interplay with the rest of social life.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Representations of the Self on Facebook: Challenging Performances

'You can usually tell something about someone's personality by looking at the person's profile. It does give you little things about someone's personality. But then again, you don't want to study someone's profile too much, otherwise they'll think that you're stalking them.'

Female student

Facebook is a place on which users are explicitly asked to present themselves. Like in most online social networks, they do so through a profile. Self-presentation is also communicated through other interactions (e.g. wall posts) that are marked by some level of publicity. At the same time, Facebook conveys representations of people independently of what they decide. Such representations go beyond the community of users – as it will be emphasised in this chapter, Facebook is even 'telling' about non-users. Through a number of elements, users can infer certain traits from others' identity, personality and social position, understood broadly. It seems indispensable to analyse on the one hand strategies conducted by people to present themselves on Facebook and to understand how others perceive these. Although self-presentation through 'CMC' (Computer-Mediated Communication) has been examined for a long time, it has most often been considered independently from the rest of social life, as if presentations on

an electronic support were self-sufficient – which may sometimes be the case. Here, it will be argued that the issue of self-presentation on Facebook cannot be understood on its own – i.e. by just looking at profiles or messages. In fact an environment marked with heavy Facebook use induces certain additional elements of self-presentation outside its own borders. This is mainly because great part of the presentation of the self on Facebook derives directly from offline social life; it is also because its very existence pushes people to take decisions vis-à-vis Facebook that are necessarily public, and can therefore be interpreted by others. Also, Facebook may participate in intensifying mechanisms that already existed, through increased publicity of documents and interaction.

In this chapter, representations of the self on Facebook will be considered as performances. The word *performance* actually refers to two different elements, which may both help us analyse Facebook users' self-presentation. One meaning of 'performance' – the one generally used by Erving Goffman – is taken from the semantic field of drama; it stresses the fact that people play a certain character or can wear different masks in their social life. The other sense of *performance*, taken from the lexicon of competition, both sporting and economic, refers to a score or achievement that can be compared to others'. These two meanings are connected: for both, individuals want to 'give a good performance'. Nonetheless, explicating these two connotations will be useful to understand aspects of presentations of the self on Facebook. First, this chapter will focus on the first meaning, emphasising the dramaturgical character of self-presentation on the OSN as well as the kind of options that individuals really have to present themselves in relation to Facebook. Secondly, it will show that self-presentation on Facebook can be regarded as a publicised

competitive practice drawing from, and impacting on, offline social life. In that sense, Facebook will be viewed as a social arena in which direct control over one's own position is limited.

## 1.      Dramaturgical Self-Presentation on Facebook

'When an individual appears before others, he will have many motives for trying to control the impressions they receive of the situation.'

Erving Goffman

'… I think [Facebook] is really what you want to show. You really have a lot of control over it: over how much you want people to see and how much you want people to know about yourself.'

Comment left by a survey respondent

A great part of the self-presentation process on Facebook and of the way it is received by others appears to be quite theatrical. One's appearance on the online social network needs certain preparation beforehand, in order to determine what one will show about himself or herself and how. The relevance of Goffman's work to self-presentation on OSNs has already been outlined earlier in this thesis. Many of the mechanisms he distinguishes in self-presentation are particularly relevant to understand it in the context of Facebook. In particular, this type of mediated communication is likely to lead people to make more use of inference, which, in Goffman's perspective, is an essential

mechanism for conferring status. While sometimes needing some remodelling, Goffman thus provides a useful framework to analyse self-presentation on Facebook as a dramaturgical performance.

## 1.1 Back and Front Regions on Facebook

Although it is difficult to set strict boundaries as to where and what each of these regions really are in the case of Facebook, it seems possible to analyse the spaces in which performance occurs in those terms, since performance has to be prepared and given. A provisional distinction between 'front' and 'back' could be made according to what is publicly visible to others online – profiles, public messages, photos etc. – and, on the other hand, what is hidden or filtered to others and that allows preparing or building the performance – behind the screen, or protected by privacy settings. In this regard, it is interesting to pay attention to the circumstances in which people use Facebook. Survey data show that users tend to prefer to check Facebook from private rather than from public places. Over 86 per cent of respondents check their account 'often' or 'very often' from their room, whereas less than 21 per cent do so from a public place – whereas it seems that email and other non-academic activities are often carried out in public places. One possible interpretation of users' preference for operating their Facebook account from somewhere private is that they think of it as a 'backstage' practice. 'The back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude'[1]: from there, users thus feel freer to fabricate their performance.

However, such boundaries might have to be refined in the course of this argument. In particular, the overlapping of online and offline makes this distinction

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[1] Goffman (1959): 98

more complex and drags some offline situations in the front region of Facebook, breaking the offline/online dichotomy as an exact basis for front and back region separation. In fact, what we have is a complex array of front and back regions that the individual have to negotiate successfully. Failure to do so may give rise to problems. This may be most visible in the case of photographs on Facebook, which will be specifically addressed later. Certain situations can reflect 'backstage difficulties', that is, when people believe they are backstage but their action can in fact be seen.[1] For instance, restricting one's privacy settings so that a specific Facebook friend can only see one's 'limited profile' is supposed to be a backstage activity. However, some embarrassing situations have been reported, in which user X realises that user Y has restricted his or her settings so that Y cannot see X's complete profile (not see his walls or photos for example). Interviews have shown a lot of collective use of Facebook – people checking Facebook together – this can for example happen when Y looks at X's profile through Z's account and notices that the latter can see more elements than he or she does.

One must now ask how self-presentation is exactly conveyed and what elements really *matter*. 'Matter' here meaning, those elements which are most taken into account by others to infer wider characteristics about that person, and the techniques or strategies used to manage the impressions that others get of oneself. Another question consists in knowing how successful these strategies can be, and to what extent individuals actually have control over their own image. Here, different channels of self-presentation will be examined. To follow Goffman's terminology, it will be argued that self-presentation occurs though information that is *given* by individuals, as well as

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[1] Ibid.: 104-105

through elements that can be *given off*. This distinction will be at the basis of the differentiation between what will be referred to as 'explicit' and 'implicit' performances'. A special mention will be made of the role played by photograph in that respects.

## 1.2 'Explicit' performances

It is worth noting that Facebook gives very little liberty in terms of profile-building compared to many other OSNs. It does not permit users, for example, to 'decorate' it extensively with wallpapers or to choose music that people hear when they go and check somebody's profile. In that sense, Lévi-Strauss's concept of 'bricolage' previously explained does not really reflect what happens on Facebook, and profiles do not look so much like teenagers' bedrooms. In principle, self-presentation is conveyed through rather formalised information whose structure cannot be changed. What can be decided on is the inclusion or exclusion of such or such section (e.g. 'political' and 'religious views', 'relationship status', 'interests' etc.). And as it will be argued, most interpretation occurs 'around' those, rather than based on the actual content of what is left. Building one's profile does not seem to be a very popular activity, scoring an average of 4.2/10.[1] Furthermore, a lot of the information left is factual, and is qualified by most respondents as 'as accurate as possible'; almost no one leaves false information. The 'about me' section, which allows a freer self-description than other sections, is left blank by most people. This would tend to argue against the idea of a dramaturgical *performance* on Facebook. In general, a profile may just give an indication of what its owner feels comfortable to reveal about him- or herself, or what he thinks is appropriate to reveal in that setting. 'Political views I haven't put anything,

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[1] Appendix 11

but religious views I have', reports an interviewee. Another person explains: 'I've put everything except sexual orientation, and that's because some of the high school students that have access to my profile could see it'. Certain groups can offer an extension for users to display their tastes, as in the case of an interviewee who says: 'I made another [group] about this really good German movie that I liked'.

However, there are cases of 'explicit' performances: a portion of people find room for articulating a particular identity through their profile and play a character, which contrary to other OSNs, is rarely disconnected from that they perform offline. 'I know a girl who made her profile very Zionist', reports an interviewee. 'I don't know why, because she's not even Jewish. But she's very interested in that culture and has a Jewish boyfriend. Maybe she does that to compensate her lack of Judaism'. These cases may be called *full performances* in the sense that the user really gives information in order to present his or her full person under that specific angle. In those cases, performance is often articulated through a coherent set of elements that includes profile information, Facebook groups and photographs. The profile builder gives purposefully enough information, covering different fields of his life, for the visitor of that page to categorise him or her. The following example of male graduate interviewee 'M' exemplifies the concept of 'full performance'. In his profile, M labels himself as 'conservative'; amongst his favourite quotes, a couple by famous writers celebrate Englishness; Facebook groups displayed on his profile include: 'British Empire' and 'The United Kingdom is a great power'. His activities feature 'rowing'. One of his groups, M explains, is private, meaning that only people from his boat club can enter it although it appears on his profile. M also appears dressed in quite a traditional way on his profile photograph, and amongst the photo albums that he uploaded and put on his site, many are from rowing and his team. All this information given voluntarily by M

forms a rather consistent whole and conveys the image of an upper-class, conservative and patriotic British gentleman. At the same time, possible marks of humour vis-à-vis this explicit self-portrait shed doubt on its absolute authenticity. Nonetheless, this is characteristic of a theatrical performance, which aims to be realistic, nevertheless giving space for various interpretations.

### 1.3 'Implicit' performances

Whereas the previous section emphasised how people can give information to establish a self-portrait, another type of channel for self-presentation will be analysed here, which may be more common amongst Facebook users in Cambridge. *Implicit performances* are more discreet and partial; the user does not renounce to present him- or herself, but he does it by *giving off* – rather than giving – some elements about his character and personality – rather than a full description of himself. 'Explicit' and 'implicit' performances are not mutually exclusive; in fact the latter can serve to complement the former. There are various reasons why such performances are favoured over other types. In general, it seems that they are better received than others. 'I have a general aversion for overt display of status on Facebook', explains an interviewee, summarising a lot of people's perceptions and judgements about Facebook. Therefore, a successful performance on Facebook often tends towards sobriety, subtlety and humour, rather than overt exhibition of one's person.

Although they allow others to grasp elements of the character through a number of signs, many are reluctant to lay a list of precise or complete information about them. 'I don't want to let people know too much about me, especially if they don't know me much' says a female interviewee. Another fear is that the character that appears through

all the information they would leave might lead people to put a clear label on them: 'I'm reluctant to joining groups because people might categorise me', reports another male undergraduate, who says that his general theme is 'minimalist'. The fact that 63 per cent of Facebook users in Cambridge do not indicate their political views[1] is indicative of the refusal to make too public statements about precise aspects of oneself. Choosing to present oneself semi-publicly under a certain religious or political banner is often assimilated to making an open claim about that characteristic, which is avoided by many. An interviewee from Northern Ireland clarifies his choice of not putting anything under 'religion' or 'political views'. Underlining that religion as a sign of political affiliation is quite a sensitive issue where he lives, he explains:

> 'Due to my involvement with the Irish society and other things in the university, I would be reluctant to put that up because it might seem that I am making a statement by saying that, which some people might interpret as offensive, or they might categorise me in such a way that I prefer not to be'.

Indeed, it seems that the act of proclaiming certain information about oneself is often perceived as political, as the individual chooses to take it out of his or her strictly private sphere. This process is apparent in an example of a completely different kind. Although openly homosexual, an interviewee expressed his slight disapproval regarding people who display too explicitly their sexual orientation on Facebook: 'A lot of my friends are gay, so I always find it funny when people leave a photo of someone giving their partner a kiss'.

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[1] Information obtained through the Facebook Cambridge page.

However, not giving clear or complete indications about oneself does not mean that users refuse giving off signs about who they are and in particular about how they are. The predominant styles of expression which are visible through publicly displayed messages aim to subtly convey the idea that the person is interesting in some way. One example is given by a female undergraduate: 'I think I have a tendency to be vague: putting enough information there so that it seems that I try to say something but not too much.' Through this style, she puts herself forward, trying to catch the attention of others. She clarified: 'Overall, my theme is to put information up there that people can make assumptions about that are probably incorrect. I guess I feel that if people know me well, then they know what the thing means, and if they don't, they can make assumptions. One way she does this is through the 'present status' line, which allows users to display information about what they are doing at the time. She explained that she sometimes puts: 'X is happy about such and such', without exactly saying what she is happy about. Then her friends sometimes enquire her about the meaning of the message, which she enjoys.

**1.4 Irony and satiric performances vs. seriousness**

Key elements of performances on Facebook are wit and irony. One of the most recurring terms used by interviewees to characterise their use of Facebook was 'bunter'. 'It's a bit of a piss-take, really; nothing serious', explains a student. In fact, it is rare to find profiles with no traces of humour, even if those are quite discreet. Sometimes, people's appearance on Facebook can be a complete comedy, in which people play an obvious role. Through such satiric *performances*, however, the user still present his own self as someone witty who does not take him- or herself seriously. The following

example of a student illustrates this practice:

> 'Regarding my profile, it's worth saying that a few of my friends and I had this idea that it's a bit sad to take yourself too seriously and try to write a story of your life on your profile – especially these keen lists of interests. So it's been a year that my best friends and I just have complete joke-profiles. For example, we have a theme and we say: we're going to have a romantic profile today. So the whole thing will be about "Lying in a man-deserted beach while listening to Shostakovich"… Or "Searching beauty and truth". And we change that quite often. So it's all quite ironic.'

While this is a performance in which irony is pushed to an extreme, wit tends to be limited to a style adopted in certain 'wall posts' or to a few profile elements. Many interviewees describe their profile as 'detached' or 'not too serious'. For example, one explains: 'I don't have my religious or political views – I just have jokes on'. Another student underlines that, although he did fill out the 'about me' section as well as other interests, he would never list every band he likes or every activity he plays, thinking of it more as a satire. This style is at the basis of the culture of Facebook in Cambridge (and probably in general) and serves to give credentials for one's humour in offline life. It is not only limited to text, and in fact, is very noticeable in a large number of photographs posted on Facebook. Photos that would aim to present the best of oneself in a serious way are not very well received:

> 'I think a lot of people use it as a way of showing off. They just tag thousands of photos of themselves that are all flattering, or they announce to the world that they're doing this and that etc.'

'I tend to put funny ones up because I don't think I take myself seriously enough to put anything posy. I think it's hilarious how some people put a photo that's actually quite posy'.

Another interviewee explained that he 'frown[s] upon' certain practices such as putting a photo taken in a studio: 'I think that's a bit vain'. People do not want to *give off* their vanity, hence such widespread use of irony, which allows users to turn any type of information about them in a manner that is more presentable on Facebook, and whose risks to be badly perceived are lower. Paradoxically, it seems that irony provides the only possibility to display status or boast about something. An example of this can be found in Facebook groups such as 'I went to a proper British boarding school', or 'Posh Boys (AKA Rahs)' which wrap with irony true facts about those who join.

## 1.4 The Presentation of the self through photographs

'From people's photos, I think you can tell a bit about their personalities […] Perhaps, by looking at what photos they allow to be tagged, you can also tell what kind of person it is. Because people who are shy, embarrassed or vain, will probably de-tag their photo straight away.'

Interviewee

Photographs convey different types of information about people: most obviously, their physical appearance, but also, more or less reliable information on their social relations and situations they have been in. With the development of digital photography, taking photos has become more trivial, especially in everyday life social settings. Photos therefore also convey information about where an individual has been and with whom

in a much more detailed and traceable way than they used to. Although it also seems easy today to edit photographs, the idea prevails that photos do not lie. A photo appears as an ocular witness of what happened for the viewer. For others to know about an individual, Goffman says that they can rely 'on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is'; and this is one of the purposes that photos on Facebook seem to serve.

It is almost in the essence of photographs to be shared at least in some way. Often, what can make photos interesting is to show them to friends or people around you that you know. Without those recipients – or at least, imagined recipients – the whole process of taking photographs would certainly loose some interest, and this public may sometimes condition the way photos are taken. In fact, it can be argued that a photo has completed its cycle when it has been viewed by its supposed recipients, which most of the time required co-presence. With the generalisation of uploading photographs on Facebook, a photo seems to complete its cycle only once it has been posted on Facebook. It seems as though there may be no point in taking photographs if it were not to put them on Facebook. An undergraduate explains: 'When I take photos at a worthwhile event, the first thing I'll do is just put them in Facebook'.

The most prominent photograph someone can have is the one that appears next to user's name on the profile and on any other message that he or she sends. Over 90 per cent of Cambridge students registered on Facebook in Cambridge chose to have such a photograph.[1] The selection of the photograph appears very much as a 'backstage' activity. Although a majority of people tend to keep the same photograph up, an active

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[1] Appendix 17

proportion of students repeat this activity at least two or three times a month.[1] Speaking of her profile picture, a female undergraduate says: 'I might change it every time I did something that I had a picture of myself that was worth being put, maybe twice a month'. This is 'not very often', she says, compared to some of her friends who change it everyday. Changing one's profile picture can also be part of a routine, which may sometimes aim to attract others, and incite them to check one's own profile. Another interviewee explains: 'I change it quite a lot', that is, 'when I get bored of the old picture'; by extension, this might mean that others are also likely to get bored of it, and maybe look less at the person's profile. Changes in profile pictures also appear in the 'mini-feeds' and are thus advertised to people around you. It is also quite frequent to see profile photographs in which the user is in company of somebody else (partner, friends, family, somebody famous etc.). In that case, the user puts deliberately forward his relationship to other people, signifying it to others. An interviewee reports: 'I had one [photograph] of myself and my brother; I just came back from holidays and I suppose I was happy to present myself with my brother'. From that photograph, others can infer the person's proximity to the one he or she is displayed with and/or his or her pride.

In terms of self-presentation, one of the most interesting features of Facebook is that photos can be 'tagged', meaning that people (you or somebody else) can write your name in the legend and that the photo will appear in your photographs. If one then goes and checks someone's profile and clicks on 'view photos of X', all photos that have been tagged with that person's name will appear. This practice gives more visibility to photos taken of someone; otherwise, photos might remain in somebody's album and not be seen by the relevant people – X and those belonging to X's social circle. Also, the

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[1] Appendix 18

process of tagging and 'un-tagging' photos allows some control over the photos on which you appear, by restricting or encouraging 'distribution', which can be analysed in terms of impression management. 'Also your friends can take the photos down if you ask them', adds an interviewee to complete the list of possibilities available to control you have on your own image. Although most of the time speaking of other people, most students interviewed reported the widespread use of such practice:

'A friend of mine un-tagged one photo because she thought she looked fat on it.'

'You get people un-tagging their photos because they think they look ridiculous on it.'

The difficulties of having one unified public and not being able to adapt one's image or discourse to different audiences have already been mentioned previously.[1] The practice of tagging/un-tagging photographs can also be used to avoid such problems. 'Once, I was interested in a girl at home and I remember that there were compromising photos of me with another girl so I "de-tagged" the photo', recalls a male student.

As already mentioned, most photos on Facebook are taken from scenes of social life in Cambridge, reflecting on Facebook events and gatherings that gather people attend in real life. Therefore, it might be argued that a first level of *front region* on Facebook is actually offline, not online. The moment at which the photos are taken acquires a different significance when one is aware of the wide distribution the photo will go through. When digital photos are regularly taken during a party, people know that their image at that time might soon be visible by many online. 'You have to be

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[1] Boyd (in press)

careful about the pictures people take when you're out', says a female student; 'there are some pretty wild parties, and I sometimes think: 'oh, that's going to be on Facebook tomorrow'. This process should not be exaggerated: interviews did not show that people felt under absolute constant pressure because of Facebook. However, Facebook seems to extend and intensify front regions. The effective distribution of images via the news-feeds also plays an important role in this process. As noted in Chapter One, students keep in mind that trivial scenes which would otherwise be shared only by those present are now more easily subject to gossip. 'The news-feeds are really what changed FB. Before, you could add any photos and people wouldn't bother going through long albums to see all of them. But now, they all appear in the news feeds', explains an interviewee.

## 1.5 Facebook-induced self-presentation beyond Facebook

Most of what has been shown so far concerns someone's image online, its relation to offline life, and its reception by others. However, it should be noted that Facebook actually generates mechanisms of self-presentation outside its own borders. By that, we mean that the existence and broad use of Facebook leads people to take decisions that are not always visible as such, but can still lead others to infer something about the actor. The most basic example regards the decision to join Facebook or not. It has already been shown that the norm, in Cambridge, is to 'be on Facebook'. In this sense, somebody who is *not* on Facebook does not seem to escape self-presentation issues related to Facebook. Not being a member of Facebook may be interpreted in several ways, but is often considered 'suspect'. An example of the type of inference that can occur in that case is provided by a survey respondent: 'I know that it is a little sneaky, but if I like a guy, I will often look him up on Facebook before going out on a date or

meeting up. It actually put me off going out with a guy at Cambridge when I found out he was not on Facebook as I wasn't really sure of his character'.

One could also think that restricting one's presence on Facebook by limiting others' access to one's profile information, allows withdrawing from presenting oneself to others. However, this is not entirely true. One student, for example, started speculating on the kind of person that would restrict their privacy settings in such way that only their friends can access their profile: 'there are actually two types of people who would restrict their profile access: exclusionists and snobs'. He then developed even further his interpretation of users with restricted profiles: 'they are either very formalised in their cliques, so in order to become in their company or to know them, you need to display some kind of interest; you need to be worthy of that'; or they are 'public school people'. Again, a similar process can occur with people who would un-tag their photos. A photo that bears everyone's name but that of one person is likely to betray that the one person whose name does not appear on the photo has un-tagged. A student notes that 'people who are shy, embarrassed or vain, will probably de-tag their photo straight away' if they are caught in an embarrassing situation. In this perspective, it may convey an even worse impression to un-tag oneself, as it will show your embarrassment. 'I never un-tag a photo of myself because I think it's unsportsmanlike', explains an undergraduate. Most actions or inactions taken by the individual will have some visibility at one point or another and will thus reflect what the individual's decision about his own image has been.

## 2. Self-presentation: *performance* as a competition reflecting offline life attributes

> 'In Cambridge, especially as the welfare officer, I see that it is a place where people are terribly driven. And by the time they get here, they look for a new competitiveness and this reaches every level, so it becomes very *socially* competitive. And with Facebook allowing to see what everyone is doing, it generates a strange atmosphere in which you can compare yourself socially: how many friends you have, how many photos you have, how many wall posts you have etc.'
>
> Student involved in the Students' Union

There is no complete opposition between the two types of *performance* that are referred to in order to describe Facebook. In both cases, Facebook conveys some representation of the individual, who wants to appear in a favourable to him or herself. Both types of performance also have in common that they stress the rich relation between someone's image offline and its representation offline. However, whereas it was previously shown that people are playing a character or displaying an image of oneself on Facebook similarly as they do offline, it will now be emphasised that these characters are somehow competing. This competition draws considerably from offline reality. Individuals have certain, though not infinite control over it. The competitive dimension of Facebook is not that of a virtual game, in which rival characters are disconnected from 'real life'. Integrated in an offline environment, Facebook serves more as a catalyst – and maybe an amplifier – of competition that is already present in Cambridge independently from Facebook. However, the OSN does not leave such competition

unchanged, and participates in reshaping and adding some new forms to existing social competition.

Understood in this new sense, *performance* is an indicator through which one can be compared to others. In sports, a performance often consists in a number, be it a score or a time, which allows a comparison with others. One is struck by the amount of elements that are quantified on Facebook: number of friends, of wall-posts, of photographs of you tagged by others etc. Put together, these can be perceived as a 'social score' that Facebook gives its users, pushing them to perform well. 'Performance' also belongs to the vocabulary of economics, which will lead us to consider all these elements present on Facebook as a form of capital. Such capital is a complex array of symbols that are taken from older forms of social capital, but that are simultaneously reworked by Facebook.

## 2.1 Reproductions of traditional social *performances*

Connections – the number of people one knows – are key components of social capital in Bourdieu's sense,[1] and can itself be a manifestation of power. Having a large 'address book' will often condition how easily someone is able to achieve certain goals and will sometimes give some indication of how important that person is. In other contexts, the number of people one is connected to may appear to reflect how popular someone is. By displaying the number of 'friends' a person has, Facebook publicises a performance summarised as a quantitative measure. This number might not be a very reliable indication of somebody's actual social capital: while some people will tend to add anyone they come across as a friend, others will have a more 'conservative' stance, and

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[1] 'The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent [...] depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilise' (Bourdieu, 1986: 249)

will prefer to wait until they actually know someone well. Nevertheless, it is this count that appears on somebody's profile and that is seen by others. 'If you go to people's profiles, you can see how many friends they have. And for some people it's very important. It determines how popular you are', explains a student. Most people have some idea of where they stand in the 'friend race'. Asked about whether he knows the number of friends he has on Facebook, an interviewee replies laughing: 'Yes! 118 on my last check!'. Those who claim they do not know how many friends they have still have some idea of their 'friend performance'; for instance, an undergraduate said: 'I have probably about 300 friends on FB in Cambridge and maybe 150 outside', which happened to be the exact figure after actually checking his profile.

Facebook also publicises other elements that draw directly from traditional indicators of status. People's names on Facebook are always followed by the network they belong to (the Cambridge network, in our case). Therefore, when dealing with people from other networks, students wear the 'Cambridge badge', which will be the first thing that people see after there name. This may confer some importance on the person, or may be felt as such. A graduate student said: 'it's cool to add old people as Facebook friends (people you haven't seen in a long time), so that they can see your picture now and see what you're doing. They can be like: 'oh she's doing a PhD at Cambridge!''; simultaneously, the interviewee made a physical gesture to signify that she had 'beaten' them in some way. In this sense, Facebook almost reinforces old forms of prestige, by creating lines of separation along pre-existing social demarcations. The fact that profiles are generally accessible to people within the same network only creates an additional barrier between people that have frequented a certain university and others. Profiles also display the networks in which you have the most 'friends'. These

'badges' may thus participate to establish the 'quality' of someone's social network: knowing people from Oxford, or Ivy League universities is a direct display of status, which might 'weigh more' than knowing people from a regional network, which anyone can join.

## 2.2 The Facebook 'twist' on social competition

Although Facebook borrows considerably from offline social life and traditional attributes of power to assess somebody's performance, it does not simply reproduce them. It also adds its own criteria and partially shapes perceptions of social success. This is done by emphasising some attributes over others, and by creating some categories that are generally more simplistic than those present in offline life – generally allowing easier quantification than offline. 'Wall-posts' or 'photo-tags' do not have a direct equivalent offline. The 'hierarchy' that can emerge from Facebook is therefore likely to differ to some extent from that of pre-existing social life. However, as these elements have become the most easily readable 'assessors' of someone's position in society (or at least, in the Cambridge community), it is likely to affect perceptions that people have of someone's social position or importance, especially when they do not know the person well.

These indicators of 'performance' on Facebook can be viewed as 'markers of hipness and being in the know'.[1] An analysis of how coolness is conferred on Facebook shows that a successful performance does not consist in maximising those indicators, but in being clever and subtle in the management of those indicators. Excessiveness is likely to be badly perceived. Those who have disproportionate numbers of friends are referred to as 'Facebook whores'; 'I know a girl at Cambridge who has 900 or 1000

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[1] Thornton, 1996

friends. I suppose that's quite ridiculous', explains one respondents. This seems to indicate to a certain extent, that Facebook has its own codes, which are understood by users, within Facebook. However, Facebook is not a 'subculture', as it cannot be understood in terms of its opposition with mainstream. The complex interweaving of Facebook and social life in should therefore lead us to examine Facebook as an additional arena for social competition within the 'field' of Cambridge, rather than as a form of 'subcultural capital'.

## 2.3 Facebook and the 'struggle' for symbolic power in Cambridge

According to Bourdieu, social life is divided into relatively autonomous fields. A 'field' can be defined as 'a space of play and competition in which social agents and institutions which all possess a determinate quantity of specific capital […] confront one another in strategies aimed at preserving or transforming this balance of forces'.[1] Fields are structured internally in terms of power relations, which are determined by the possession of resources relevant to the field. In each field, different types of capital – such as social capital[2] – acquire symbolic character on the basis of what is recognised by others. Symbolic capital, 'commonly called prestige, reputation, renown'[3] is thus granted in relation to each field. Symbolic capital is 'nothing other than capital, in whatever form, when perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the internalisation (embodiment) of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when it is known and recognised as self-evident'.[4]

In certain ways, student social life in Cambridge can be seen as one of these 'fields', with its own conveyors of prestige, honour or coolness. In the specific

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[1] Bourdieu & Wacquant (1996): 76
[2] See Note 1 on page 72
[3] Bourdieu (1985): 724
[4] Ibid.: 731

environment of Cambridge, the possession of such symbolic capital might lead others to pay attention to you, speak about you, or respect you more. One might aptly argue that student life in Cambridge is itself divided into subfields, in which pursuits of different kinds of symbolic capital (e.g. in some groups, prestige gained via intellectual achievements may be more valued, whereas in others, being a member of the first boat of a college will outweigh any other resource). Nonetheless, Cambridge remains an array of social arenas in which students aim for distinction(s). Siisiäinen (2000) underlines that symbolic capital exists only in the 'eyes of the others'. However, how are the different forms of capital exactly transformed into symbolic capital? What is the actual nature of the process through which 'objective differences' are interpreted by others as having a symbolic character, in this given field? One key answer to this question lies in that 'the effectiveness of symbolic capital depends on real practices of communication'.[1]

This study has emphasised how student social life in Cambridge increasingly relies on Facebook, which has become an essential support for communication in this environment. As already noted in the first chapter, Facebook is particularly well suited for many-to-many communication at scales ranging from the whole university community to narrower groups and networks. Thus, Facebook has become an intrinsic part of the social 'field' of Cambridge University. In this context, the OSN provides classifications and indicators that make distinction and symbolic recognition possible. It thus participates in the transformation of different forms of capital into symbolic capital. It also makes the conveyance of traditional symbolic capital more effective. One example provided by an interviewee shows how Facebook can even help transform

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[1] Siisiänien (2000): 12

what we may call 'intellectual capital' into symbolic capital: 'Occasionally, people hear of some super genius at Cambridge and they hear their name, so they'll just go on Facebook and see who this person is'. In this case, somebody's intelligence acquires symbolic character with the help of traditional institutions (being at Cambridge, getting high marks), which spreads by word of mouth and via Facebook, thus helping to identify 'the genius'. If you do not appear on Facebook, then, you partially exclude yourself from the field of Cambridge life. This way, Facebook participates to increase prestige from which the individual may benefit.

This may help explain why about 90 percent of students at Cambridge are on Facebook. Someone who is not part of the OSN misses chances to win stakes in the game that is played in the Cambridge arena. Nevertheless, a small proportion of students still remain outside Facebook, and it is interesting to interpret their choice in the light of this analysis. The significance of this decision is obviously not the same for undergraduates (3.5 percent of whom have never used Facebook) than for fourth-year PhD students who tend not to use Facebook as much.[1] The latter are likely to compete in a different field from that of most students. In their instance, Facebook does not play such a central role in conveying symbolic capital, hence the fact that almost half of respondents of 27 years or more are not on Facebook. However, why does a small minority of undergraduates choose not to join Facebook? In their case, self-exclusion from the network may be part of a choice for a different kind of social life. It may also sometimes be a way to signify one's superiority to the community – as if they did not *need* it to succeed. For instance, a survey respondent who stopped using Facebook explained: 'I did enjoy the moral superiority that 'facebook suicide' has given me'. It is

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[1] Appendices 21

also interesting to note that non-users feel academically superior to users.[1] This may indicate that students who remain out of Facebook seek a different kind of distinction. However, even academic merit – as noted earlier – is to be transformed into symbolic capital in some way, and Facebook is one of the most efficient ways for this to happen.

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[1] Appendix 22

# CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown that Cambridge students cannot remain indifferent to Facebook. In fact, each student has to position him- or herself vis-à-vis Facebook and answer a series of questions which will determine his or her positioning, such as whether to join or not, but also, what to include, what to say or not to say on Facebook, etc. The interdependence between student life and Facebook makes it hard not to be on the network if one wants to enjoy a normal social life, since the latter is increasingly organised individually as well as collectively on Facebook. Not being on Facebook, therefore, is taking a risk to miss social events. If one is not on this OSN, in fact, one is not able to live the part of social life that is continued on Facebook, where relations to others that range from close friends to acquaintances are being reworked. One will miss the photographs and comments based on what happened offline, which then re-emerge in conversations, thus feeling left out from this part of social life. Also, not being on Facebook would mean to partially exclude oneself from the symbolic field of student social life in Cambridge, since Facebook has become a major conveyor of symbolic capital within this 'field', and to some extent, outside.

One important question concerning Facebook – as well as OSNs in general – is whether they are here to stay. This thesis has emphasised how Facebook and social life are almost symbiotic in a specific locale; as a consequence, abandoning Facebook, at least in the short term, seems improbable. At the same time, Donath and Boyd (2004) already underlined that a number of users were getting tired of using OSNs once they had collected many friends, and hypothesised that these websites might become victims of the same fashion diffusion patterns that brought them into existence. This thesis will not conclude with an essay of futurology, and thus cannot assert what will become of

such networks in five or ten years. However, one can be confident, that if OSNs remain, they will not keep the exact same form. Returning to Facebook, the 'news-feeds' which have been mentioned at several occasions in this thesis started less than a year ago; and toward the end of the period in which this study took place, Facebook has started to include a range of new 'applications' that users can add to their accounts. One of them, for example, is called the 'Market place' and allows posting items for sale within your network. Gowns, ball tickets, and other articles rooted in Cambridge student social life thus end up being traded on Facebook.

If OSNs persisted in one form of another, they would offer plenty of additional questions for future research. In our case, it would be interesting to know what would become of these extended networks of 'Facebook friends' once individuals leave university and do not share the same locale. In particular, one can wonder what would happen to the hundreds of *dormant connections* that have been accumulated. In a few years, research could then try to determine whether Facebook really results in a long term widening of social circles, even outside a shared place, or if these connections fade away as people stop living in the same locale or stop using Facebook.

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# APPENDIX

**Appendix 1 – Distribution of students of the University of Cambridge**
**(subjects, undergraduate/postgraduate, origin)**

## FULL TIME EQUIVALENT STUDENT NUMBERS 2004-05

|  | UG | PGT | PGR | Total | Total (03-04) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arts and Humanities | 2,487 | 39 | 746 | 3,272 | 3,157 |
| Humanities and Social Sciences | 3,043 | 944 | 1,142 | 5,129 | 5,597 |
| Biological Sciences | 1,944 | 0 | 553 | 2,497 | 2,616 |
| Physical Sciences | 2,308 | 26 | 981 | 3,314 | 3,316 |
| Technology | 1,458 | 227 | 848 | 2,530 | 2,469 |
| Clinical Medicine | 455 | 0 | 289 | 744 | 671 |
| Others | 0 | 24 | 293 | 317 | 308 |
| Continuing Education / CPI (excluded from total) | 571 | 82 | 0 | 653 | 685 |
| Totals | 11,693 | 1,260 | 4,851 | 17,803 | 18,133 |
| Consisting of: |  |  |  |  |  |
| Home/EU students | 10,723 | 926 | 2,957 | 14,605 | 14,935 |
| Overseas students | 970 | 334 | 1,894 | 3,198 | 3,198 |

Source:
http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/planning/data/facts/2006facts_and_figures_poster.pdf

**Appendix 2 – Interview Sample**

| Sex | Graduate/Undergraduate | Subject | Nationality | College |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | Undergraduate | Arts | British | St Johns |
| Female | Graduate | Arts | Irish | Magdalene |
| Male | Graduate | Arts | American | Magdalene |
| Female | Undergraduate | Arts | French | Girton |
| Male | Undergraduate | Arts | Scottish | Girton |
| Female | Undergraduate | Science | British | Girton |
| Female | Undergraduate | Science | German | St Johns |
| Female | Undergraduate | Science | American | Newnham |
| Female | Graduate | Science | American | St Eds |
| Male | Graduate | Social Science | British | Clare Hall |
| Female | Graduate | Social Science | Greek | St Eds |
| Male | Undergraduate | Social Science | British | Girton |
| Male | Undergraduate | Social Science | British | Girton |
| Male | Undergraduate | Social Science | Irish | Girton |
| Male | Graduate | Social Science | British | Magdalene |

**<u>Appendix 3</u> – Survey Sample**

**Sex**
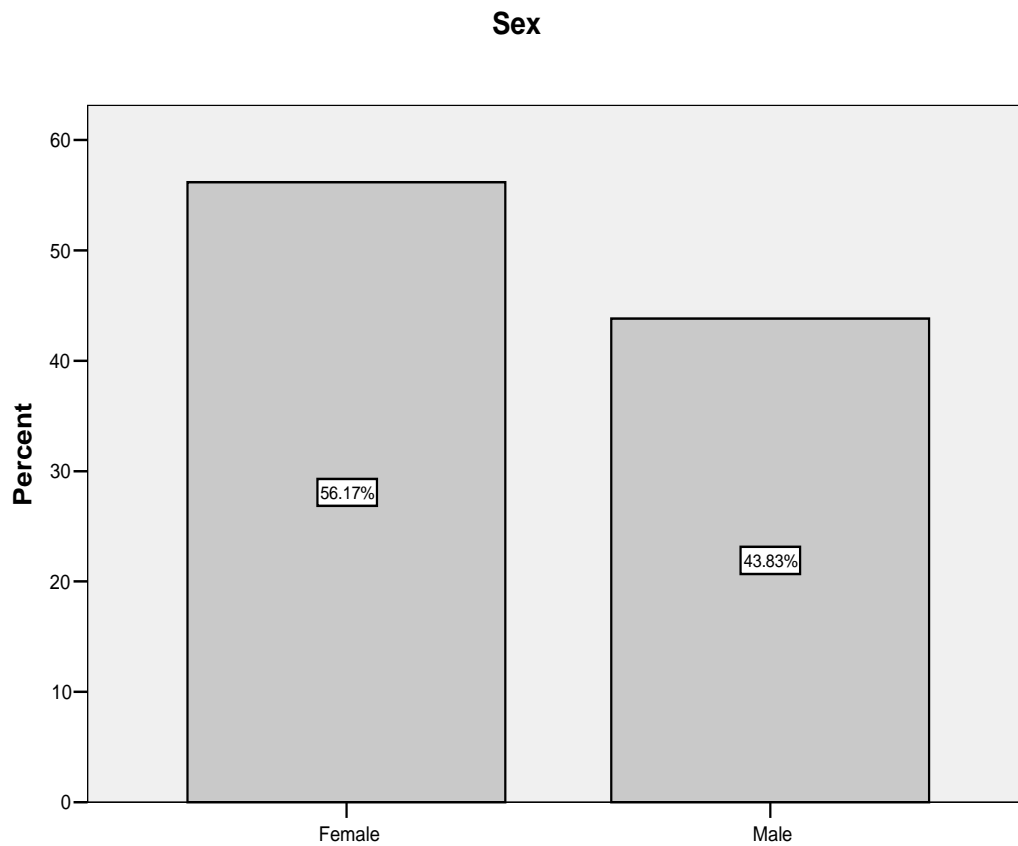


**Year of study (If special programme  please indicate the most adequate answer)**

**Age**
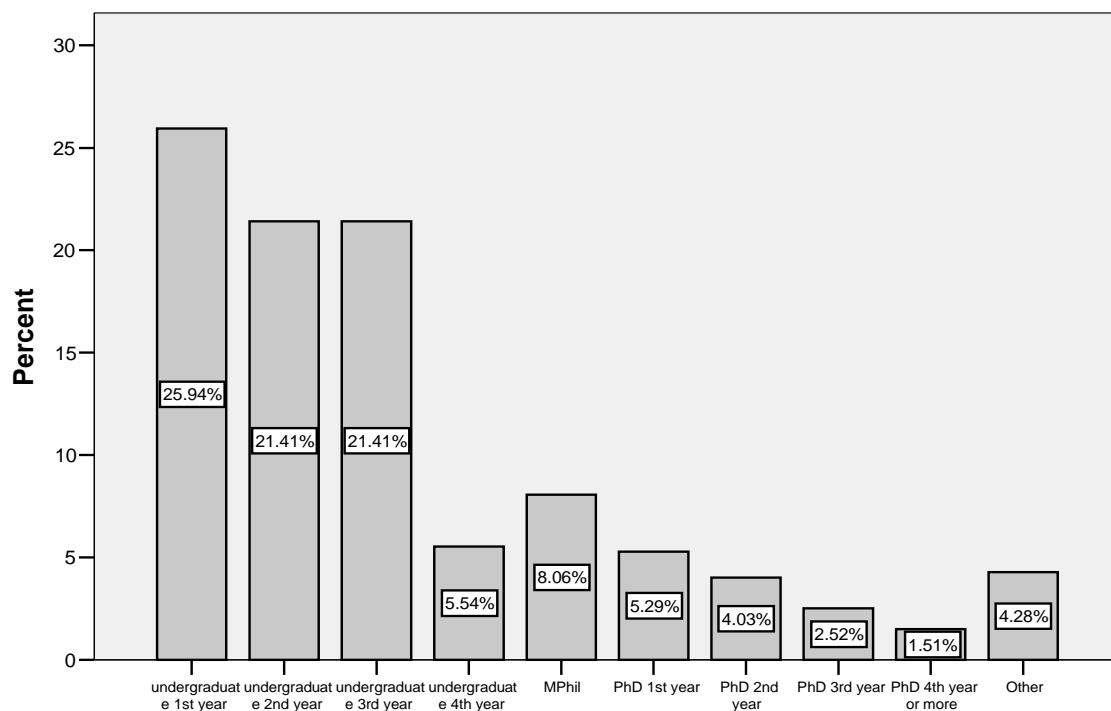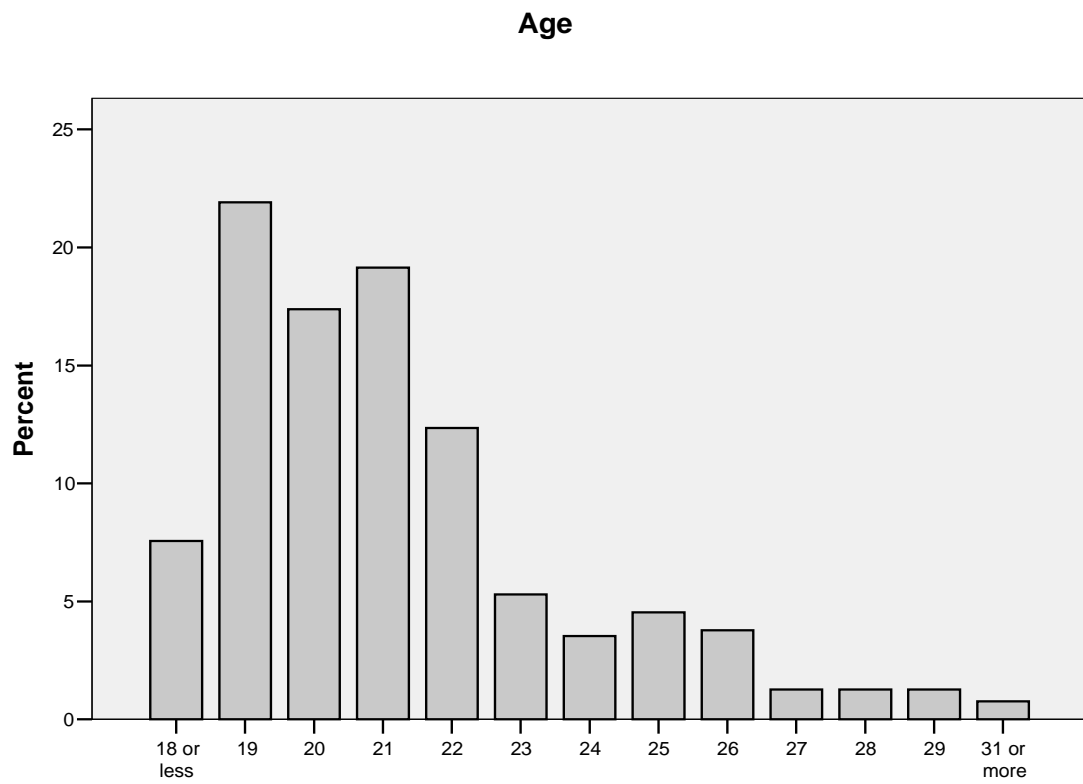
## What category does your subject fit best?
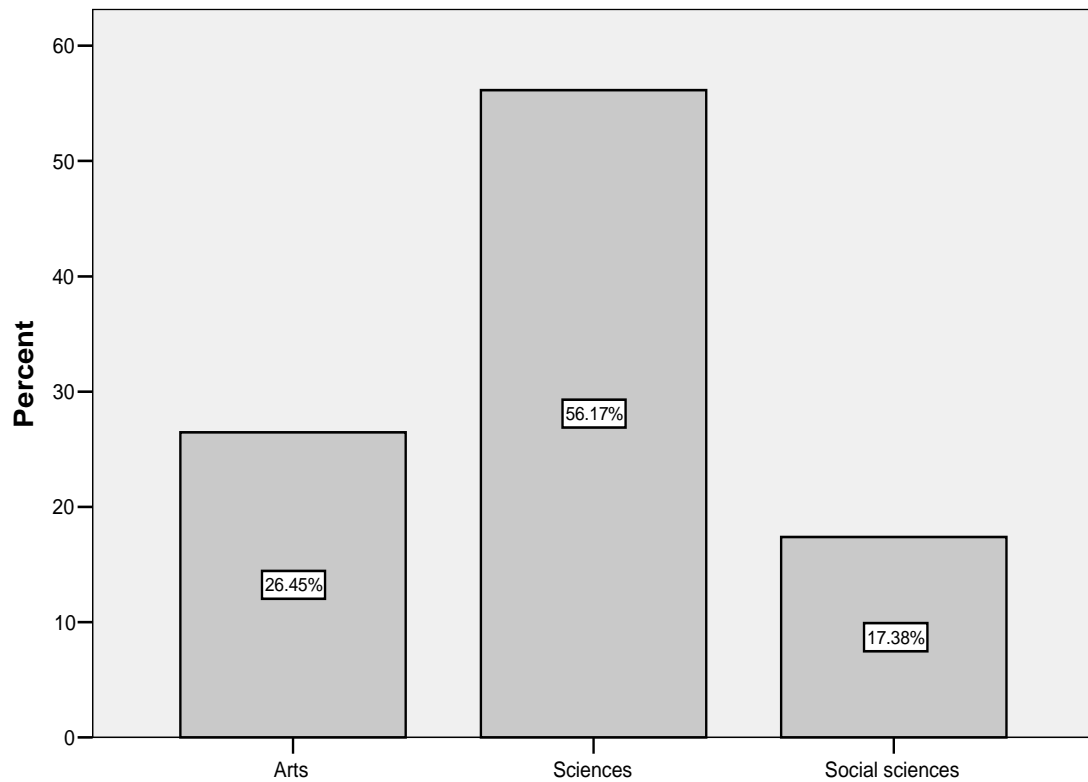


**Appendix 3** – Survey Sample (cont'd)

## Nationality
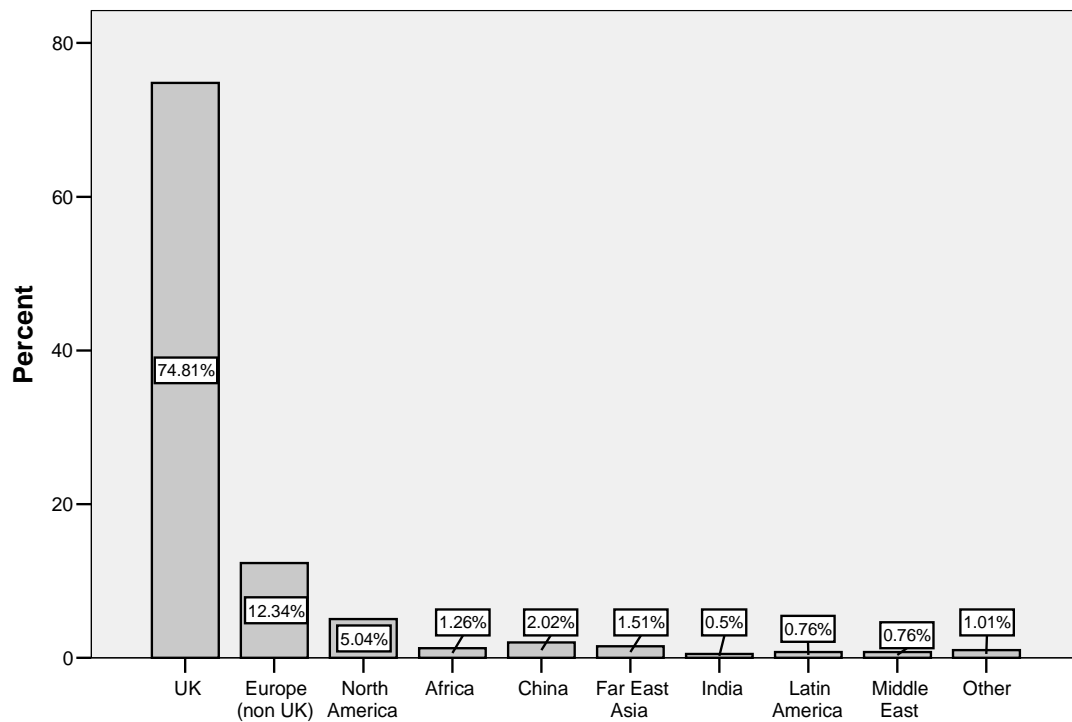
**Appendix 4 – 'Facebook has become a significant element in the Cambridge student life'**
(Rate how true this statement is from 1 to 10)



Distribution of students
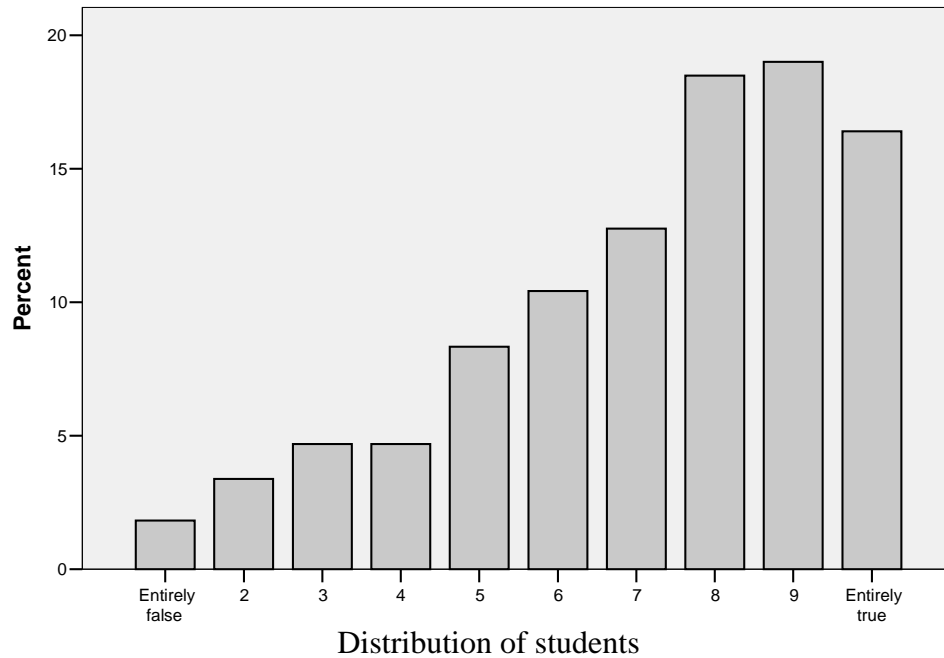
**Appendix 5 – In Cambridge, are most people you know on Facebook?**
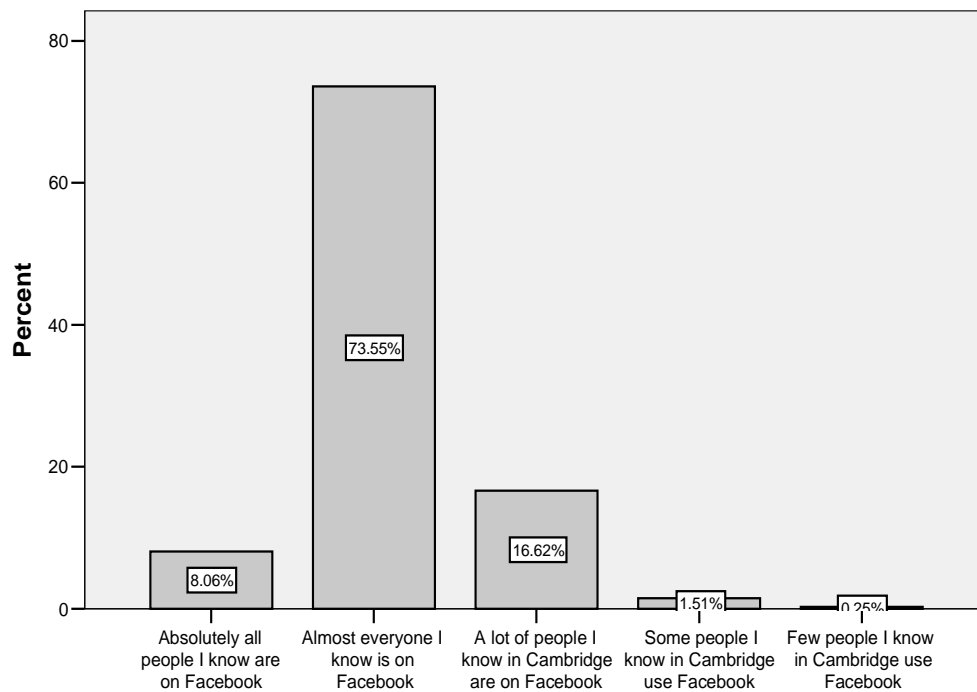
**Appendix 6 – Methods for obtaining the proportion of publicly-available profiles**

**Profiles available to all network**
26,912 members of the Cambridge network on April 11th.
Random sample of 126.
105 have their profile available to anyone in the network / 21 do not.

**83.3 % of current Cambridge students have their profile available to anyone.**

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**Appendix 7 – Number of 'Facebook friends' inside and outside Cambridge**
(Distribution of students according to the number of friends)

**In the Cambridge network:**
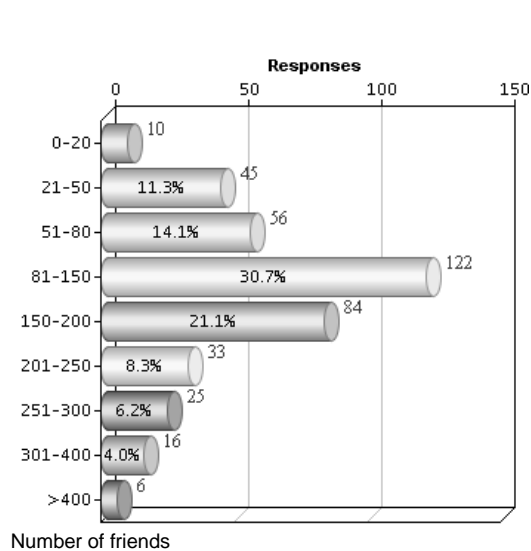


**Outside Cambridge:**
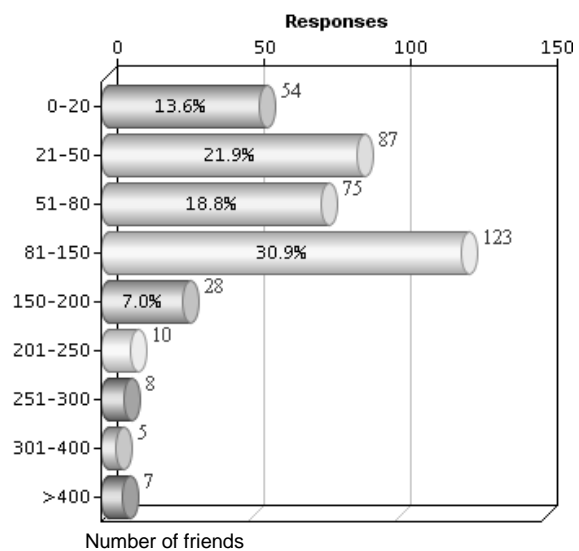


**Legend:** 48.4% of students have over 150 friends in Cambridge, while fewer than 28 % of students have less than 80 friends. In contrast, a majority of Cambridge students (54.6%) have less than 80 friends outside Cambridge and only 17.1 % have over 150 friends.

**<u>Appendix 8</u> – Did you use Facebook prior to arrival at Cambridge?**

No

Yes

7.81%

92.19%
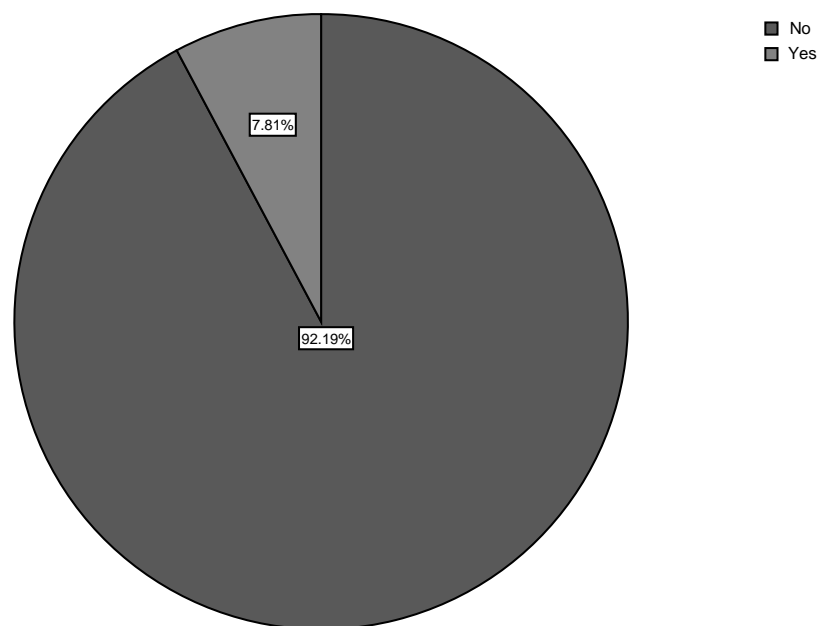
**Appendix 9** – Facebook activity during term time/outside term

**How often do you check Facebook during term time?**
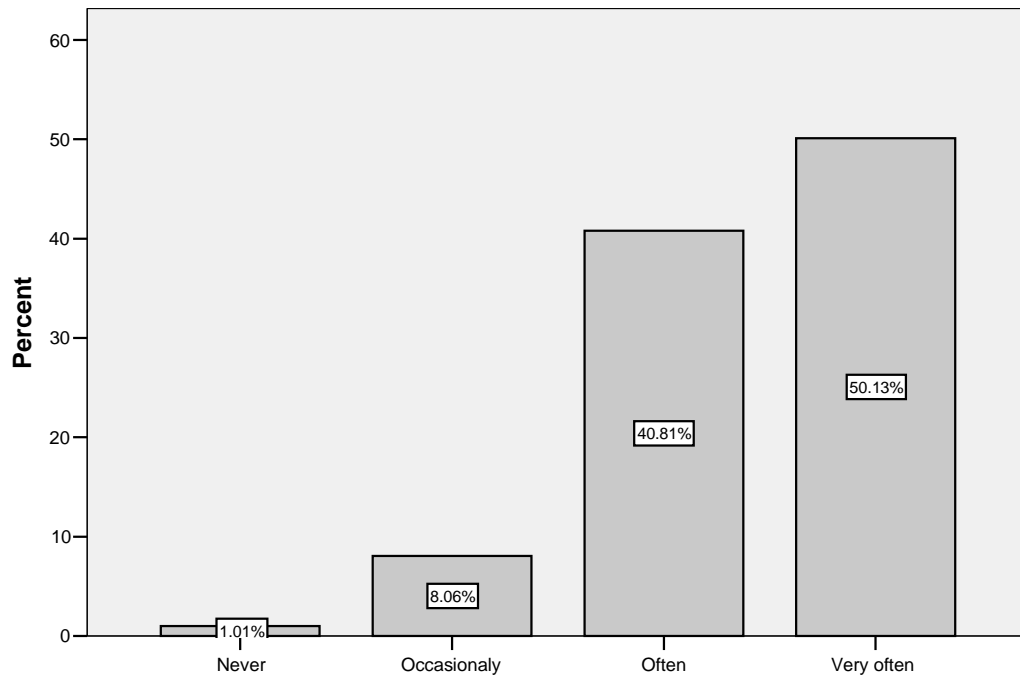


**How often do you check Facebook outside term?**
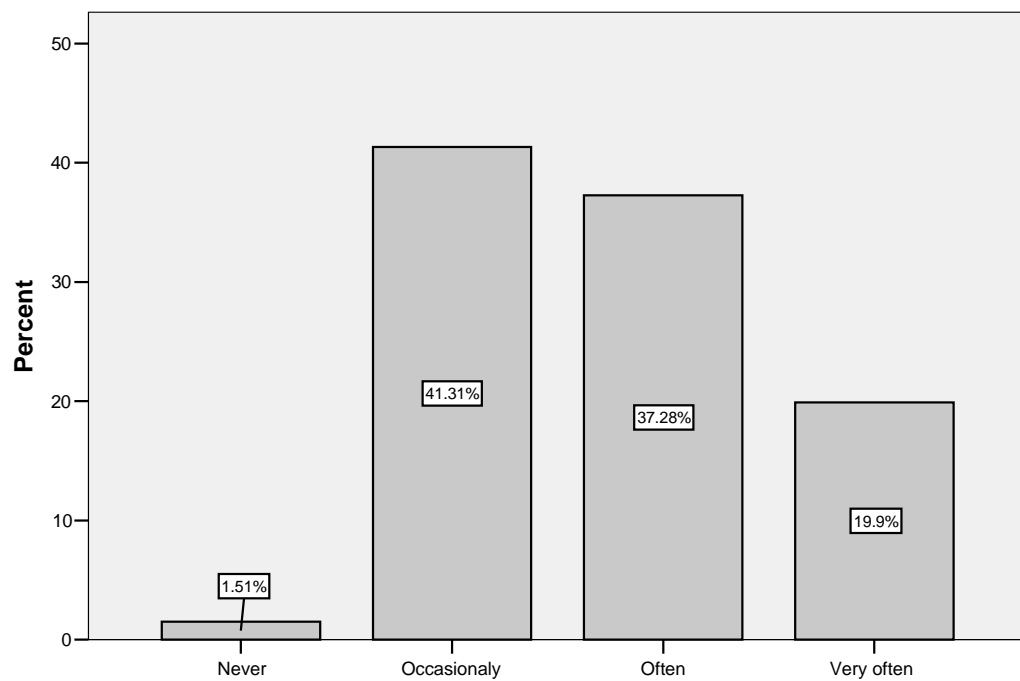
**Appendix 10 – How much do you check Facebook from your room/from a public place?**

**From your room**
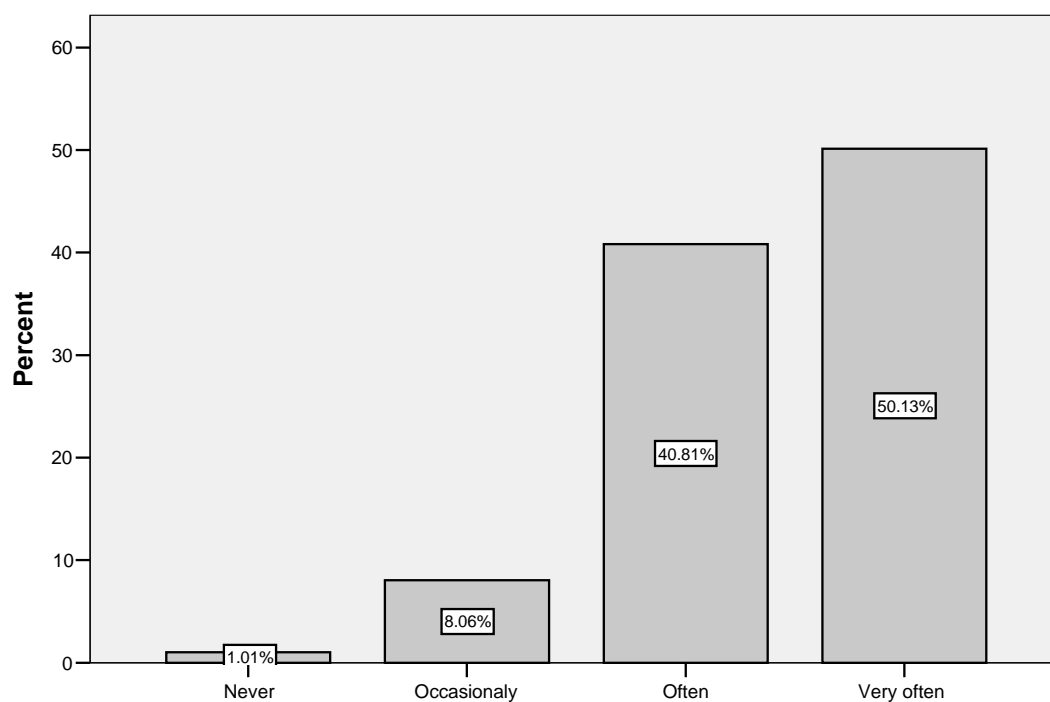


**From a library or a computer room?**
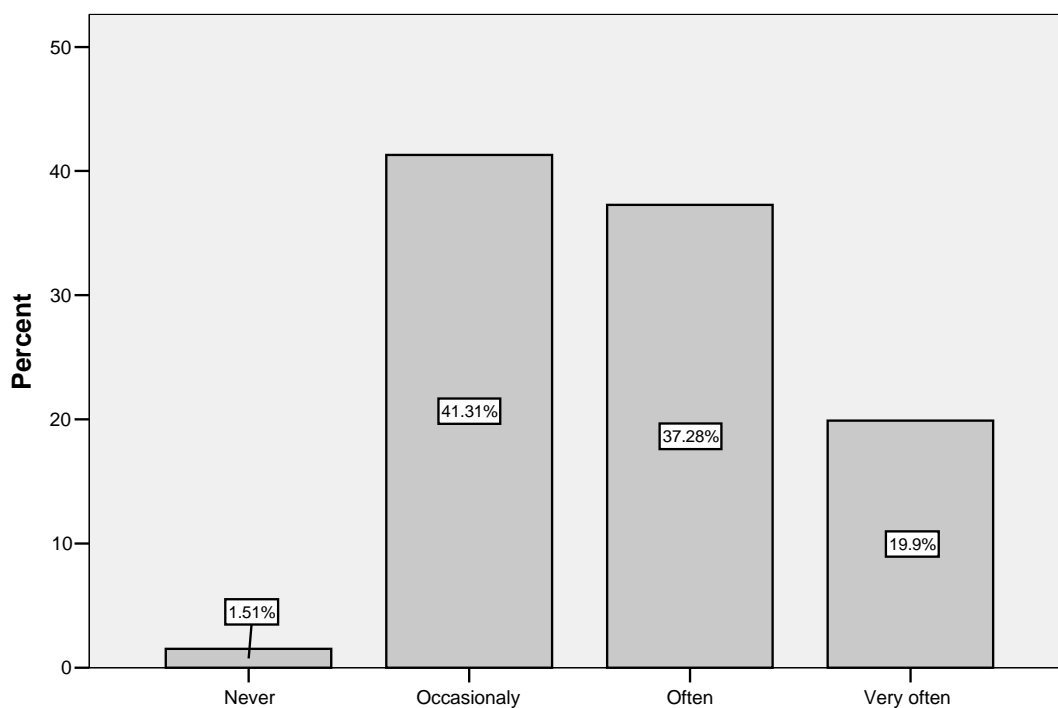
## Appendix 11 – Appreciation of different Facebook features
(Average scores from 1 to 10)

| How much do you like the following activities on Facebook | Mean |
| --- | --- |
| Building/editing my profile | 4.2 |
| Writing wall posts | 6.0 |
| Looking at Friends  profiles | 7.0 |
| Uploading photo albums | 5.1 |
| Looking at Facebook friends'  photographs | 7.2 |
| Checking the 'news-feeds' | 5.1 |
| Looking at profiles of people you've met but you don t know well | 5.9 |
| Looking at profiles of people you don t know | 3.8 |
| Checking groups | 4.0 |
| Posting events on Facebook | 3.3 |
| Posting items (videos  notes etc.) | 2.8 |

## Appendix 12 - Do you find Facebook…
(Average scores from 1 to 10)

| | |
| --- | --- |
| useful in general? | 7.0 |
| useful to know about others? | 6.8 |
| useful to keep in touch? | 8.1 |
| addictive ? | 7.1 |
| time-consuming? | 7.2 |
| Entertaining? | 7.0 |
| Informal? | 7.4 |
| Superficial? | 6.7 |
| too public/transparent? | 5.4 |

## Appendix 13 – Sociability and Facebook use
(Self-description: average score from 1 to 10)



**Do you use Facebook?**
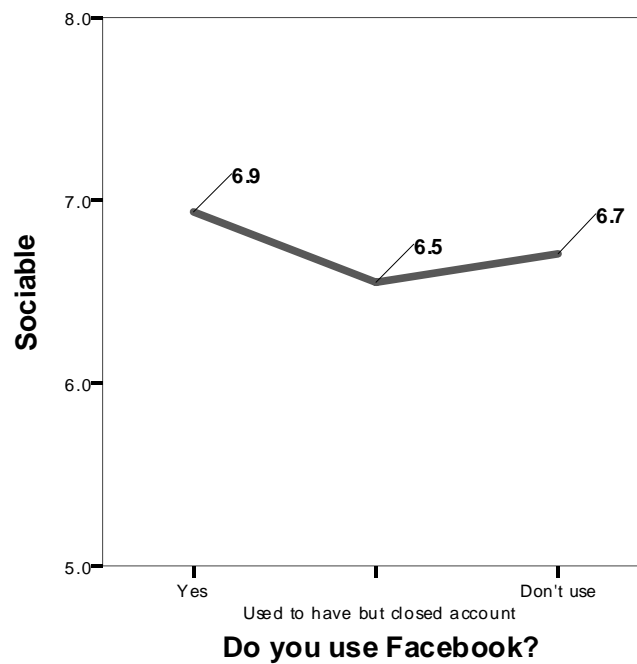
## Appendix 14 – Formal social involvement and Facebook use per stage in studies

| Compared to others how much would you say you are formally involved in clubs societies JCR/MCR etc.? (mean) | | Facebook Users | Non-users |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stage of study | MPhil | 5.6 | 4.7 |
| | Others | 5.5 | 4.0 |
| | PhD | 5.7 | 4.6 |
| | Undergrads | 6.0 | 5.2 |

Even controlling for graduate/undergraduate differences, Facebook use relates positively to formal social involvement

## Appendix 15 – Frequency of Facebook use and feeling of integration in Cambridge social life

| Non-parametric correlation (quantitative variable/ordinal qualitative variable) | | | How often do you check your account |
|---|---|---|---|
| Spearman's rho | How integrated do you consider yourself in the Cambridge social life? | Correlation Coefficient | .101(*) |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .045 |
| | | N | 397 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Appendix 16 – Has Facebook ever made you see someone again that you would probably not have met again otherwise?**
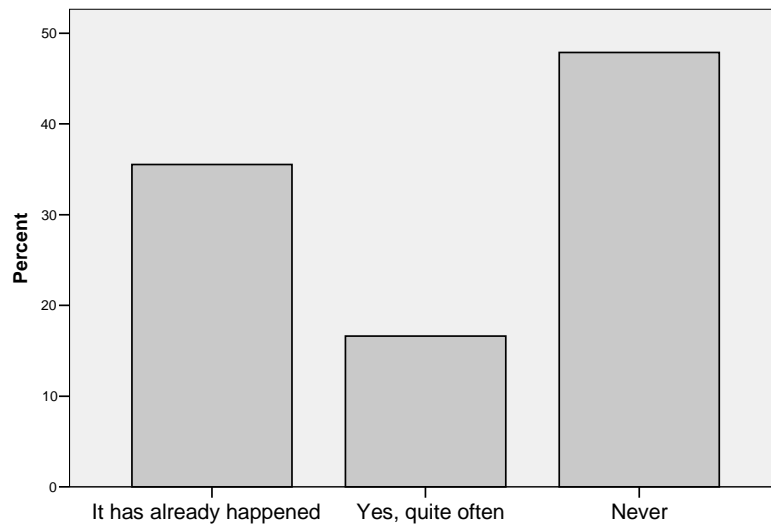


**Appendix 17 – Methods for obtaining the proportion of profiles with a photograph**
27,255 members of the Cambridge network on April 16th
Random sample of 181
164 with profile photo
17 without profile photo
**90.6 % of members have a photo**

**Appendix 18 – How often do you change your profile picture?**
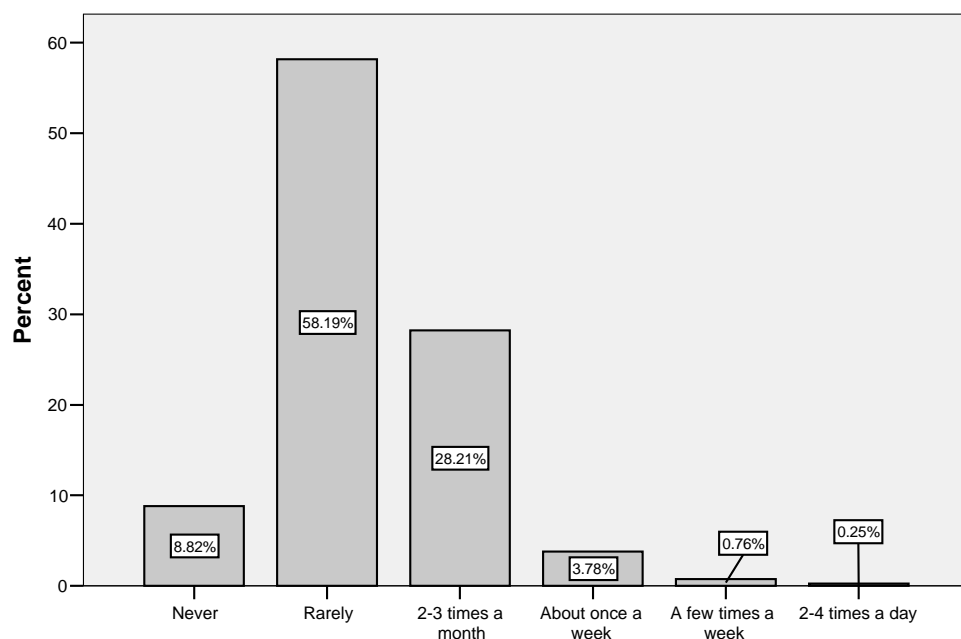
**Appendix 19 – Type of information left on profiles**

| Information given on profile | Percentage of users giving such information |
|---|---|
| Full name | 97.2 |
| Sex | 94.2 |
| Photo | 97.2 |
| Sexual orientation | 61.5 |
| Hometown | 82.6 |
| Birthday | 93.5 |
| Year of birth | 84.1 |
| Education | 76.8 |
| Relationship status | 60.7 |
| Looking for (e.g. friendship etc.) | 22.2 |
| Political views | 38.3 |
| Religious views | 30.2 |
| Home address | 33.8 |
| Phone number | 33.5 |
| Activities | 53.9 |
| Favourite | 59.9 |
| Courses followed at Cambridge | 59.7 |
| 'About me' section | 40.3 |
| Work info | 19.6 |

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## News Feed

*Matthew Burke is attending Sidney Sussex MCR Garden Party. 12:41pm*

*David De Baers added a new photos. 12:21pm*



*Updated: 5 of your friends changed their profile pictures. 10:48am*
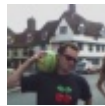


Jane     Ben     Jeremy     John     Luke

*Johnathan Woods and Matthew Burke are now friends. 7:25 pm*

*Gerald Smith is expecting a vicious hangover. 6:58am*

*Carry McLuhan is @ aDaft Punk concert. 11:55pm*

*Robert Livingstone is no longer listed as a single. 12.05am*

*Jeffery Lane is going to a ball… and the carraige and footmen are waiting*

*Leonard Sachs is attending Jesus May Ball*

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*This page has been modified

**Appendix 21 – Use of Facebook according to stage of studies and age**

| | Do you use Facebook? | | | | | | | |
| | Yes | | Have heard but don't use | | Used to have but closed account | | Never heard | |
| Year of study | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Undergraduate | 295 | 94.2 | 11 | 3.5 | 7 | 2.2 | | |
| MPhil | 32 | 91.4 | 3 | 8.6 | | | | |
| PhD 1st | 21 | 84.0 | 4 | 16.0 | | | | |
| PhD 2nd | 16 | 69.6 | 6 | 26.1 | 1 | 4.3 | | |
| PhD 3rd | 10 | 66.7 | 3 | 20.0 | 2 | 13.3 | | |
| PhD 4th | 6 | 60.0 | 2 | 20.0 | 1 | 10.0 | 1 | 10.0 |
| Other | 17 | 94.4 | 1 | 5.6 | | | | |

| | Do you use Facebook? | | | |
| | Yes | | No | |
| Age | Count | Row % | Count | Row % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-22 | 311 | 94.5% | 18 | 5.5% |
| 23-26 | 68 | 91.8% | 8 | 8.2% |
| 27- | 18 | 52.9% | 16 | 47.1% |

**Appendix 22 – Facebook use and feeling of academic performance**
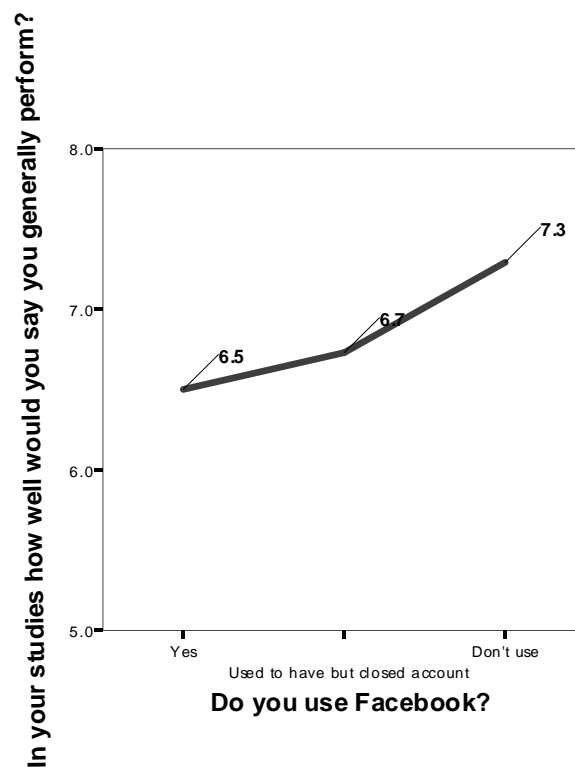
**Appendix 23 – An example of Facebook profile***



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