

**SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY ONLINE AND OFFLINE: A STUDY OF
THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN OFFLINE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FACEBOOK
USAGE BY RHODES UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FROM SOCIALLY
DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS.**

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Abstract

Based on in-depth focus group and individual interviews, this thesis examines how Rhodes University students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds experience campus social life and how they subsequently use Facebook to perform, represent and negotiate their social identities. The study discusses utopian and dystopian positions and interrogates these theoretical perspectives in relation to the students' Facebook usage. The popularity and uptake of Facebook by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those here at Rhodes University, is a growing phenomenon, provoking questions about the relationship between social experiences, social identity and social networks. Rhodes University's social space has been identified by previous studies as modern, liberal, "elite" and divided along race and class lines. The ways in which students experience this campus social space relates to their subject positions and identities. The study employs different perspectives of identity construction to interrogate the students' subject experiences in home and school contexts before coming to Rhodes University. The students' subjective positions are primarily embedded in tradition and their subject positions are sometimes in tension or come in conflict with the modern and liberal elements permitted by the Rhodes University context. The students also experience and adopt modern and liberal elements in their lifestyles which are permitted within the Rhodes University social space.

The thesis found that Facebook offers a platform which facilitates a social connectivity that influences how students perform their identities in relation to their offline social identities and lived social experiences. This study concludes that the mediated symbolic materials for the construction and negotiation of identity provided by Facebook are sometimes in tension with the demands of traditional subjectivities experienced by these students at Rhodes University. Facebook allows the students to reinforce and affirm the validity of their traditional identities in this modern and liberal space. However, it also emerged that Facebook facilitates and allows students who experience and incorporate the modern and liberal elements permitted at Rhodes University to represent and negotiate their subjective positions online. The findings of the study indicate that participants primarily communicate with their friends, families, relatives and acquaintances - people they know personally offline, in line with the theoretical position which argues that online relationships are primarily shaped by offline relationships.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late father: John Natsai Chatora (1945- 1998). Gumbi, I know you would have been proud – your work ethic continues to inspire me.

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Abbreviations and Figures

Abbreviations

ESP	Extended Studies Programme(s)
SNS	Social Networking Site(s)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Scholarship on the relationship between social identity and Facebook considers the middle and upper-middle classes to be the early users of Facebook and has thus been concerned with exploring how these early users partake and perceive the social networking phenomena (boyd¹, 2008). This is primarily because of the nature of Facebook's creation and its early exclusive uptake by the students of Harvard University. However, at Rhodes University there has been a noted uptake of Facebook by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and it is this group who provide the research subjects for this research.

The development of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, provides spaces conducive to human agency in producing online content. SNSs are Web-based services that allow individual users to present themselves to other users using a variety of formats, including text, photographs and video (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 2). Facebook, the SNS under focus in this study, enables users to create an online profile and join virtual groups based on sharing common interests and tastes, which is argued to often create a community that coheres around particular social identities (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007: 1).

1.2 Research background and theoretical insights

There has been much debate about how the Internet and its interfaces, such as SNSs, affect the formation, growth and maintenance of new online social relationships or sustain existing off-line relationships. Evident in the literature are two broadly opposed stances. There is a utopian position that is premised on the potential of the Internet and its applications to “revolutionize society for the better [and] bring together disparate people from around the world [to] allow relationships to flourish in an environment of equality and respect” (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3). Critics of this utopian position argue that online relationships are primarily shaped by offline relationships. For instance, boyd (2008) argues that online social identity performance is related to the physical self, grounded in offline social relations, which in turn influence the performance of online activities.

¹ danah boyd prefers the lower-case representation or reference of her name, which is maintained throughout this thesis

This study seeks to explore how students from marginalised backgrounds at Rhodes University negotiate the tensions and conflicts between different social and cultural identities, and how these offline identity tensions and struggles inform the users' self-representations on Facebook. Self-representations on Facebook are evident in the self-produced profiles created by users. The users can choose various modes of self-representation to represent themselves on their profile. The profile is "generated using the answers to questions, which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests, and an 'about me' section" (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 2). There are different modes of self presentation on Facebook which enable users to signal and perform their identities and lived experiences.

Central to this interrogation are theories of identity construction. From a poststructuralist perspective, identities are constructed within an environment of contesting fields where one's identity emerges in relation to others (Hall, 1992). Furthermore, the process of identity negotiation is "open ended and problematic" because "within us are contradictory identities pulling in different directions" (Hall, 1992: 277). The means through which social identities are negotiated and expressed can be understood as identity performance. Identity performance refers to "social identities that are 'performed' with a particular audience in mind, or, literally, in view. ... By identity performance we mean the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity" (Klein, Spears and Reicher, 2007: 3). This thesis seeks to explore how students experience the campus social life and how their identities and lived experiences are signalled and performed on Facebook in line with the understanding of identity as a "performance" offered by (Klein, Spears and Reicher, 2007: 3).

1.3 Statement of the problem and importance of the study

The study of Facebook use enables one to explore the contested nature of identity and its implications for the maintenance of offline and online social relationships. The study investigates how students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience the Rhodes University social space and how they subsequently perform their identities on Facebook. The study tests whether the students' usage of Facebook supports the libertarian claims offered by utopians that social networks allow and encourage people to communicate in an "environment of equality and respect" (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3). The study also tests the dystopian

position which gives primacy to offline relationships in shaping online interaction. The dystopian position argues that online performances are not free-floating but the offline experiences influence these online performances. The online representations reflect the deeper social issues and practices already inherent in the offline world.

1.4 Goals of the research

The primary goal of the research is to examine how marginalised students on the Rhodes University campus use Facebook to represent and perform their identities while allowing them to engage across social strata. The study interrogates the theoretical debates to explain the research participants' Facebook usage and explore whether their use of Facebook supports the utopian libertarian claims, allowing them access to wider campus social networks or whether their Facebook use mirrors offline campus relationships which are typified by a feeling of marginalisation. The understanding of marginalisation used in this study is two-fold; it primarily refers to the educational facet of marginalisation and deprivation (Truscott and Milner, 1994:38-39). The research subjects come from previously or currently disadvantaged educational backgrounds where the schools they attended were or are still characterised by an acute lack of resources. The South African educational system is still characterised by extreme inequalities and these inequities have implications on the learners who go through this system (Van de Berg, 2008). Marginalisation also relates to the students' experiences of Rhodes University and how they feel about this social space in relation to their disadvantaged backgrounds, subject beliefs and experiences (Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report, 2010).

1.5 The context of the study: situating Facebook usage at Rhodes University

Facebook is the leading networking site in terms of worldwide traffic rank (www.comscore.com) and the Rhodes University Facebook network currently has 6 015 members (www.facebook.com). The study uses Rhodes University as a research site to explore the debate as to whether the presentation of the self on Facebook primarily reflects the relationships the students have already established offline, or alternatively whether Facebook usage play a utopian role of enabling marginalised students access to wider social networks.

1.6 Methods, procedures and techniques

The study is informed by a qualitative research methodology whose objective is to “study human action from the perspective of the social actors themselves” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 270). It employed individual and focus group interviews with Facebook users from ex-DET school backgrounds. The number of participants was 16 students. These were divided into three focus groups of four participants each and four individual interviews.

In addition, I examined the current Facebook profiles of the research participant’s at the time of research. This data was drawn from the students’ online self-presentations ranging from group membership, fan pages, posts and comments on pictures or photographs and wall comments. I used the focus group and individual interviews to reflect and comment on the online texts (Press and Livingstone, 2006 in White and Schwoch).

1.7 Structure of the study

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. The first is an overview of the research and justifies the purpose of the study. It also establishes the origins of the research and explores the context of the study.

Chapter 2 explores the history of the Internet in order to situate the development of SNSs. It maps out the inception of SNSs, explores the SNSs timeline and the main features of SNSs. The chapter then explicates the theoretical insights that inform the study, namely the utopian and dystopian positions. The chapter concludes by summing up evidence on the growth of Facebook and the ways in which its social role has been theorised.

Chapter 3 explores the nature of identity in society. It discusses identity and identity performance on Facebook in relation to the theoretical insights on the relationship between offline and online identity and social relationships. The chapter also examines and reviews relevant literature, particularly studies which have focussed on identity, identity performance and identity management on Facebook, and other studies which have theorised the social role of Facebook.

Chapter 4 discusses the context of the research. It explores the concept of youth in South Africa. The chapter examines the history of the South African educational system and the resulting relationship between youth and education. This is linked to studies which have explored the relationship between social class and educational background in relation to students' sense of belonging and alienation at institutions of higher education. Rhodes University as the research site is also discussed, portraying the university's history, institutional and social culture. The chapter examines three studies carried out at Rhodes University that explore the institutional and social culture and how students from educationally marginalised backgrounds experience the campus social life.

Chapter 5 examines the research methods employed in this study. It explores the traditions of qualitative research and argues for the usefulness of qualitative research methods for this study. The study employs in-depth individual interviews and focus group interviews as its primary method of data collection. The thesis also employs online data collected from the research subjects' Facebook profiles in order to explore the relationship between the subjects' offline lived social experiences and their online performances.

Chapter 6 presents the findings of the thesis interviews and interprets the research participants' Facebook representations and identity performances in relation to the interviews. It discusses the findings with regard to how the research participants experience Rhodes University's social space. Different facets of how identity is constructed and performed at Rhodes by these students are also explored. The chapter links the findings back to the identity theories, utopian and dystopian theories. The findings are also discussed in relation to the theoretical perspectives on the social role of SNSs.

Chapter 7 discusses the research participants' usage of Facebook in relation to their offline experiences. The chapter links the findings back to the identity theories, utopian and dystopian theories.

Chapter 8 provides a conclusion to the thesis and summarises the key findings, limitations and critiques.

1.8 Conclusion

This introductory chapter presented the background to the study, an overview of the research and justifies the purpose of the study. It established the wider context by stating the origins of the research and explored the context of the study. The chapter discussed the research methods employed in the study and provided the general structure of the thesis. The following chapter presents the history of the Internet, SNSs and Facebook and explicates the specific theoretical insights that underpin this study.

Chapter 2: History of the Internet, SNSs and Facebook

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, the aim of this study is to examine Facebook use and interrogate the different theoretical positions which relate to this form of social networking. The study particularly investigates the use of Facebook by marginalised students at Rhodes University. The study further explores how the students' offline social experiences reflect on their online activities and representations on Facebook. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine the technology in question by mapping out its brief history, early development and explore how its usage has changed. This chapter maps out a history of the Internet and World Wide Web in order to situate the development of communication interfaces such as SNSs.

The chapter explicates the specific theories that inform this research. The development of the Internet and its interfaces cannot be divorced from human agency or social action. The fact that the Internet is inextricably connected to human action has ignited and prompted considerable debates on whether the Internet and the Web are beneficial or disadvantageous to society's development. The disagreements around the Internet and its interfaces are premised on the debate between utopian and dystopian understandings of the role of communication technologies in society.

2.2 A brief history of the Internet and the World Wide Web

The Internet is defined as a global collection of networks that connect computers and servers together (Lister *et al*, 2003: 165). The Federal Networking Council in the United States of America describes the Internet as,

[T]he global information system that (i) is logically linked together by a global unique address space based in the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons; (ii) is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, and/or other IP-compatible protocols; and (iii) provides, uses or make accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein. (Lister *et al*, 2003: 165)

This ostensibly technical definition describes the Internet simply as a system of and for computers to communicate and share information and data. The basis of the Internet were established in 1969 when the US-based military and scientific research project, Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) embarked on an assignment that developed the aforementioned protocols that allowed computers to form networks and communicate (Lister *et al*, 2003: 165). The Internet has changed meteorically in the two to three decades that has followed its inception. This is because of various technological advances within the Internet itself, its associated technologies and interfaces. Among others, the technologies that have perpetually transformed the outlook of the Internet were the invention of the modem and the World Wide Web. The invention of the modem in the late 1970s by two Chicago students allowed for the transfer of information between computers over regular telephones system (Slevin, 2000: 32), and this led to a positive domino-effect resulting in the development and proliferation of new Internet and computer technologies.

The conception of the World Wide Web provides one of the most innovative and constructive applications for the facilitation of communications and exchange of data through the Internet. Although people often use and refer to the Internet and World Wide Web interchangeably, the Internet and the World Wide Web are not the same. The Internet is defined as a global data communications system that provides connectivity between computers (Lister *et al*, 2003: 165). The Web, as it is often called in short, is defined as one of the services communicated through the Internet. It is a collection of interconnected documents, webpages and other resources, connected by hyperlinks embedded in hypertext and Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) that are used to share and retrieve data via the Internet system (Slevin, 2000: 37-38 Olsen, 2005: 93-94). In short, the Web is an application operating on the Internet. Therefore, data displayed on webpages is accessed, viewed and retrieved through a multifunctional interface known as a browser allowing users to communicate and interact through it (Slevin, 2000: 38).

Since inception, the Internet and the Web and their associated applications and interfaces have developed exponentially. The development of the Web dramatically improved access to and use of the Internet across the world to the extent that by 1999 the total number of Internet users worldwide was estimated to be between 150 and 180 million (Slevin, 2000: 40).

Current estimates put the figure at over 1.6 billion users (www.internetworldstats.com). The immense popularity of the Internet and the Web and their respective technologies among global citizens has ignited debates and research around the consequences of their uptake on the users and the society at large. The following section discusses the specific utopian and dystopian positions that inform this thesis.

2.3 The utopian understanding of the Internet and its interfaces: definitions and critiques

There has been much debate and research on how the Internet and the Web and their interfaces affect the formation, growth and maintenance of new online social relationships or sustain existing offline relationships. There are opposing positions which claim the Internet can either empower society or is malignant to societal development. A utopian position is premised on the potential of the Internet and its interfaces to “revolutionize society for the better...bring together disparate people from around the world [and] allow relationships to flourish in an environment of equality and respect” (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3). The technological developments in recent years, such as improved broadband and the proliferation of mobile telephony that have improved access to computers and mobile phones, have reinforced these libertarian and utopian convictions that the Internet and the Web enable new relationships and connections. These are based on conceiving the Internet as the “gateway to a new era of democracy, equity, plenitude and knowledge” (Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 4). These libertarian benefits will be realised through the unbridled exchange of information afforded by the capacity of the “Internet to liberate interpersonal relationships from the confines of physical locality and create opportunities for new personal relationships and communities” (Rheingold 1993, quoted in Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 4).

Conversely, critics of this utopian position give primacy to offline relationships in the shaping of relationships that are developed and performed online. This position views the Internet, its interfaces and resulting “online relationships as shallow, impersonal, and often hostile” (Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 5). Online relationships are seen as superficial and superfluous if they do not fully capture the offline real conditions of existence. Offline social relationships fundamentally contextualise and influence online activities. Exemplifying the position which gives primacy to offline relationships in shaping online use, boyd (2008)

argues that online social relationships are related to the physical self, which is grounded in offline social relations, which in turn influence the performance of online activities. There is a “direct link between offline and online identities” (boyd, 2008: 129) and the online activities are performed with people met offline. It is because of this “direct link between offline and online, [that people] are inclined to present the side of themselves that they believe will be well received by these peers” (boyd, 2008: 129) (see also Weber and Mitchell, 2008: 44). The use of Facebook highlighted has a strong association with maintaining or solidifying existing offline relationships, as opposed to meeting new people (Ellison *et al*, 2007: 1).

This study seeks to examine the use of Facebook by a specific group of students on the Rhodes University campus. This will enable me to test the utopian perspective on the students’ usage of the interface and examine the dystopian claims that give primacy to offline relationships in the shaping of online use. To better understand how the interface in question has developed and how it is being used, there is need to map out its brief history and main features as outlined in the next section.

2.4 The emergence of SNSs: definition and main features

Social Networking Sites (SNSs), as forms of communication have gained immense popularity. The growth of the Internet and the subsequent advent and development of the World Wide Web laid the foundation of the much touted online communications. SNSs are defined as:

[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 2)

SNSs are often ideally designed to be unbridled communication spaces that are diverse and widely accessible to various populations. However, boyd and Ellison argue that it is not uncommon to see “groups using sites to segregate themselves by nationality, age, educational level, or other factors that typically segment society, even if that was not the intention of the designers” (2007: 2). This study seeks to further explore this assertion by analysing how the

possible offline marginalisation of a specific group of students influences their online activities. The study explores the role of the technology in mediating social relationships on a highly divided and stratified university campus.

Users of SNSs first register themselves and then get an account. After joining a site, an individual is asked to fill out online forms containing a series of questions which generate the profile. The profile is created using the answers to these questions, which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests, and an “about me” section. Profiles bring out a user’s identity and a user can “type oneself into being” (Sundén, 2003: 3 quoted in boyd and Ellison, 2007: 2). It is standard procedure for most sites to encourage users to upload a profile photograph, although this is not mandatory.

Internet and Web technological improvements have presented SNSs with new features which in turn have improved the online communication process. Improvements in bandwidth and the advent of broadband, whose systems have the capacity to carry multiple channels of video, audio and computer data simultaneously, have been at the heart of the development of SNSs. Some sites allow users to augment their profiles by adding multimedia content such as videos, audio and slides. Facebook is one of the best examples of a site which has successfully leveraged its own features and outsourced third party multimedia applications through its Facebook platform and linking to other social media sites such as YouTube.

SNSs customise their sites to reach potential users in developing countries where bandwidth is either slow or expensive. For example, Facebook has recently launched Facebook Lite, a simpler and slimmed down version targeting people with slow or poor connections. The service offered is “limited to letting users write on their wall, post photos and videos, view events and browse other people’s profiles. There are no apps or special boxes” (www.news.bbc.co.uk). SNSs have also utilised the high penetration of mobile phone in developing countries by creating interfaces which operate on mobile phones. For example, across Africa, “1 in 50 Africans had access to a mobile phone in 2000 and by 2008 the figure was 1 in 3” (de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh and Brinkman, 2009: 11). Although mobile phone ownership does not automatically lead to Internet usage, it offers the potential for usage and ensures SNSs reach diverse populations where technological constraints exist.

Interactivity is the hallmark of SNSs. Interactivity is defined as, “user engagement with media texts...greater user choice...being interactive signifies the users’ ability to directly intervene in and change the images and texts that they access...to produce meaning” (Lister *et al*, 2005: 20). This is done within the bounds set out in the terms and conditions of the respective site. The applications and online tools offered by SNSs allow people to communicate, collaborate and openly share information, thereby foregrounding the power and agency of users. Different SNSs provide diverse platforms in scope which allow for users to post messages on their contacts’ profiles. Users can post comments on the multimedia content and on a range of other activities that they like or are engaging in. SNSs have incorporated computer mediated communications tools such as email and instant messaging provision to chat and text as well as forums or discussion boards. These tools vary from site to site.

SNSs allow users to form communities within the social network and discuss issues that are of importance to them. These communication platforms take various forms, such as groups, discussion boards and forums, depending on the site. The spaces are platforms where social relations and identities are formed, performed, affirmed, produced and reproduced. These communication platforms are essentially one of the primary junctures where offline meets online. The groups users belong to and the issues they raise in forums, discussions boards and through other online representations speak to their offline relations and identities. Therefore, there is a symbiotic relationship between the offline and online regarding the expression of social relations and identities (Ginger, 2008: 36).

The following is a section on the key features of SNSs. However, the section is not conclusive because SNSs are too broad and the features vary from site to site.

2.5 Timeline of main SNSs

SixDegrees.com is identified as “the first recognizable social network site launched in 1997... [It] allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. Each of these features existed in some form before SixDegrees” (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 4). Figure 1 provides a timeline of the launch dates of many major SNSs. SixDegrees

was fairly successful but in 2000, the site closed because it was not sustainable. Most of its users did not have enough contacts to sustain communication. Consequently, the “early adopters complained that there was little to do after accepting Friend requests, and most users were not interested in meeting strangers” (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 4).

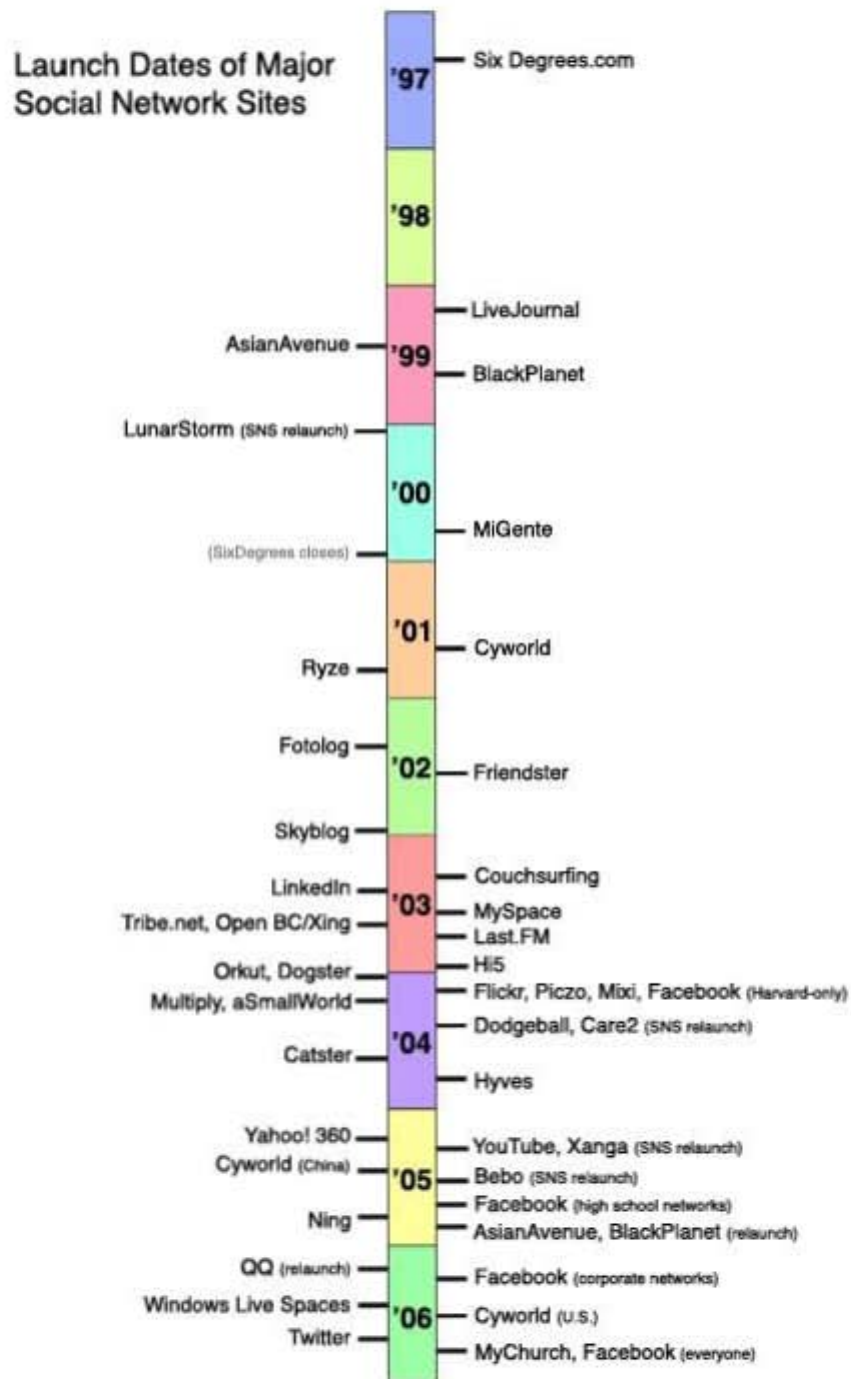


Figure 1. Timeline of the launch dates of many major SNSs and dates when community sites re-launched with SNS features (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 6).

In the period 1997-2001, a number of SNSs were developed although some of them failed. The period 1997-2001 was characterised by an increase in numbers of SNSs which catered for various interests. From 2001 onwards, several SNSs were created with varying degrees of success. The next section discusses the history and some of the features and applications of Facebook which are used by participants of this study.

2.6 Facebook early history, growth and statistics

Facebook was created in early 2004 and it was exclusively designed for college students to network and socialize with each other. The site was founded by Mark Zuckerberg with his roommates and fellow computer science students Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes, while they were students at Harvard University (www.facebook.com). Membership was initially limited to Harvard University students and within the first month of its creation, more than half the undergraduate population at Harvard had an account (www.facebook.com). The site's popularity continued to increase and soon expanded to Stanford University, Columbia, Yale and all the Ivy League and Boston area schools (www.facebook.com). Eventually, the site was opened to college students at universities in Canada and the United States and by September 2005 the site had launched a high school version, though new users required an invitation to join (www.facebook.com). Although Facebook accepted membership from high schools and universities, users were required to have a university email addresses connected to those institutions. This prerequisite, "kept the site relatively closed and contributed to users' perceptions of the site as an intimate, private community" (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 8). The site was opened in September 2006 to everyone around the world aged 13 and older with a valid e-mail address and this marked the birth of an unprecedented online phenomenon.

The site has grown exponentially since its inception and has since become the world's leading SNS after overtaking its main rival MySpace in April 2008. Facebook attracted 132.1 million unique visitors in June 2008, compared to MySpace, which attracted 117.6 million, effectively becoming the world's leading SNS (www.comscore.com). The website currently

has more than 250 million active users worldwide (www.facebook.com). According to statistics compiled by comScore and Alexa Internet, Facebook is the leading networking site in terms of worldwide traffic rank (www.comscore.com) and is currently the second most popular website worldwide after Google (www.alexa.com). The rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views over the past three months (www.alexa.com). A more significant feature of a site's popularity is not simply membership of social networks but the overall session time spent on the site relative to others. Facebook is the most popular site on the Internet using the average time spent on a website measure. Users spend an average 32 minutes per day on Facebook as compared to YouTube's 22.6 minutes per day, 9.6 minutes per day for Yahoo, 8.7 minutes per day for Google and 4.7 minutes per day on Microsoft's Windows Live (www.alexa.com).

2.7 Main applications and features of Facebook

The success and popularity of Facebook has been attributed to its innovativeness and potential to adapt to technical changes. One of the main features distinguishing Facebook from other SNSs is that Facebook users are unable to make their full profiles public to all users. Users can only have their full profiles visible to people they are friends with or to people in their "primary network" if their privacy settings on their Facebook account permit this. The primary network is defined by affiliation to a city, workplace, school, or region (www.facebook.com). For example, by making South Africa one's primary network, South Africa will appear next to the user's name for all users not on this network. The users will also see people, groups, and events from South Africa first in search results (www.facebook.com).

Another well received feature that differentiates Facebook from early SNSs was the creation in May 2007 of a Facebook platform providing the ability for software developers to design "applications" that interact with core Facebook features. This allows users to personalise their profiles and perform other seemingly mundane activities, such as comparing movie or music preferences and doing quizzes.

Facebook has a number of popular interactive features such as the wall. The wall is a space on every user's profile page that allows friends to post messages, comments, videos, links or

attachments for users to see. This feature is visible to anyone who is able to see that user's profile, depending on the privacy settings set. Facebook reports that users can always "remove comments they don't like from their own Walls...and restrict who their Wall is visible to, or turn it off entirely" (www.facebook.com).

The photos application has been one of the most popular features on Facebook. For users, this application allows them to upload albums and photos which comply with the site's terms and conditions. Users can upload 200 photos per album and they can set privacy settings for individual albums, limiting the groups of users that can see an album. For example, the privacy of an album can be set so that only the user's friends can see the album, while the privacy of another album can be set so that all Facebook users can see it (www.facebook.com). Another feature linked to the photos applications is the provision to "tag", or label users in a photograph. The user who has been "tagged" in a picture is notified via a link to that particular photo and the user can either approve or disapprove this tag.

For researchers and scholars, SNSs, in general, and the phenomenon of posting photos, in particular, provide an important research context for investigation into the "processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance" (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 9). The photos that are posted by users relate to their offline social relationships and these presentations of self are selected and managed in relation to the users' offline relations and identities. According to Donath and boyd (2004), photos and "public displays of connection" (quoted in boyd and Ellison, 2007: 9) "are identity signals that... may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles" (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 9). Consequently, the photos application is an appropriate site to investigate how offline identities are reflected online through photos.

The news feed is a feature that was created in September 2006. It appears on every user's homepage and highlights recent activities such as profile changes, photo updates, upcoming events, status updates and birthdays of the user's friends (www.facebook.com). Users can control and customise the type of information that can be shared with friends and they are able to prevent friends from seeing updates about certain types of activities, such as profile changes, wall posts, and newly added friends.

In April 2008, Facebook introduced an instant messaging application called ‘Chat’ to several networks. The application allows users to communicate with friends and is similar in functionality to desktop-based instant messengers (www.facebook.com). The site has since incorporated a messaging functionality similar to e-mail with its own inbox to facilitate private messaging. Messages sent from different groups and applications that the user subscribes to are sent automatically to their Facebook inbox.

One of the features central to this study, is the ‘Facebook groups’ application. With Facebook groups, users can join and create up to 200 groups based around shared interests and activities (www.facebook.com). The group application page displays users’ recently updated groups as well as the groups their friends have joined (www.facebook.com). Each group has an administrator(s) and officer(s) whose job is to maintain the group by approving new users, organising events, promoting the group, inviting new members and deleting or reporting offensive content. Every group has its own embedded functionality to post photos, videos and a wall where users can post comments. Each group has a discussion board where users can start a topic and contribute towards any topic under discussion. Groups are organised by interests such as “music, business, common interest, geography, internet technology, just for fun, sports and recreation, organisations, and student groups” (www.facebook.com). These spaces are essentially sites for discursive practice, where identities are formed, performed, affirmed, produced and reproduced.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter mapped out the history of the Internet and World Wide Web within which SNSs, such as Facebook, emanate. It discussed the utopian and dystopian understandings of the Internet and its technologies and also looked at a critique of the two positions and how these three positions inform this research. The chapter explored the history of SNSs and mapped out a timeline of this development, focussing mainly on the significant SNSs and their main features. The chapter then discussed Facebook, exploring its history and the changes it has gone through in its five years of existence. The last section analysed Facebook’s main features and applications and briefly discussed the factors that differentiate the site from other SNSs.

Chapter 3: Identity Theories and the Social Role of SNSs in Identity Performance and Expression

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the literature on SNSs and the various theoretical perspectives on the social role of Facebook in the context of offline social relationships and social identity. It examines previous studies focussing on the social role of Facebook and discusses these studies in light of the utopian and dystopian positions. The chapter explores the nature of identity in society and relates the notion of identity to identity performance on Facebook. The chapter discusses the concept of identity in line with the objectives of the study; that is, how students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds experience the Rhodes University social space and how the students consequentially use Facebook to perform their identity. The last section discusses and reviews relevant literature, and particularly studies that have focussed on identity, identity performance and identity management on Facebook and provide theoretical perceptions on the social role of Facebook.

3.2 Defining identity

The thesis draws on theories that are relevant to the research focus in its discussion of identity. Theoretical perspectives on identity offered by critics such as Lacan, Freud, Giddens, Mead, and Smith, generally point at two primary notions of the self, either as an internal perception or an external social identity (boyd, 2002: 21). boyd begins on the premise that the self is a complicated project and my thesis starts from the same premise.

Internal identity is defined as “an individual’s self perception in relation to their experiences and the world” (boyd, 2002: 21). Thus, identity can be defined as a sense of the self as an individual or the sense of the self in relation to others, known as social or collective identity. Thompson writes:

Self-identity refers to the sense of oneself as an individual endowed with certain characteristics and potentialities, as an individual situated on a certain trajectory. Collective identity refers to the sense of oneself as the member of a social group or collectivity; it is a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a social group which has a history of its own and a collective fate. (1995: 186)

Self-image or self identity relates to the social categories that people belong to or do not belong to. People's beliefs and behavioural patterns signal who they relate to and this is inextricably linked to the socio-historical and cultural capital at their disposal. The values, beliefs and behavioural patterns are defined as 'symbolic materials' and the "process of identity ... always builds on a pre-existing set of symbolic materials which form the bedrock of identity" (Thompson, 1995: 186). The symbolic materials or resources which individuals use to construct the self can either be lived experiences or mediated experiences (Thompson, 1995). The lived experiences define our everyday social activities or practices and the "process of self-formation is increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials" (Thompson, 1995, 207). Furthermore, the self is reflexive in nature (boyd, 2002: 21) and the self relies on society and symbolic materials as a basis for such reflexivity. Without society and mediated experiences, the process of self formation and self evaluation would not be possible (Giddens 1991: 52-53). Consequently, society provides the basis "by which individuals can give meaning to the different physical, psychological, philosophical, and moral aspects of their identity" (boyd, 2002: 21). From this perspective, society guides social behaviour and defines what is acceptable and what is not and "[t]he more that an experience challenges an individual's notion of self in relation to society, the more it impacts their identity" (boyd, 2002: 22).

Identity also relates to identification with significant others "whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same) ...on the basis of social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and interests" (Buckingham 2008: 1). This identification involves human agency. People can make decisions based on their experiences and also make meaning out of these social experiences. Identity is not solely "based on the characteristics that are written on the body or the circumstances in which one is born, but on how the individual reacts to and internalized these experiences" (boyd, 2002: 21). However, this does not mean that human action is free from societal constraints. Identification with others depends on individuals subscribing and adhering to the modes or codes of acceptable behaviour of that group. People evaluate and monitor themselves in relation to the people around them and because of this self surveillance people become conscious of their behaviour in relation to societal norms and values (boyd, 2002: 21). Consequently, social identity is what individuals use to communicate "by taking specific aspects of their internal identity,

project[ing] it into their social identity and us[ing] this to construct a performance that will allow them to negotiate social situations” (boyd, 2002: 22). Therefore, social identity is the yardstick by which individuals use to measure social action and validate or invalidate social behaviour.

These perspectives are useful in exploring the research participants’ experiences at Rhodes University and how they negotiate their various subjective positions. The experiences of Rhodes students reflect different social practices which impact on how students perform their different identities. The way the students experience the Rhodes University social space is also influenced by their socio-cultural background and this impacts on how the students negotiate and perform their identities.

3.3 Identity performance on Facebook

The means through which social identities are negotiated and expressed can be understood as identity performance. Identity performance refers to “social identities that are ‘performed’ with a particular audience in mind, or, literally, in view... By identity performance we mean the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviours relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity” (Klein, Spears and Reicher, 2007: 3). In social interactions, people use language, body movements and even clothes to signal and reveal information about themselves to others (boyd, 2008: 128). However, the self is disembodied online; and the “consciousness becomes separated from the body..., [but online] it becomes a body itself” (Bukatman (1993) quoted in Lister *et al*, 2003: 368). On SNSs, “profiles can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being... [to] express and represent salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret” (boyd, 2008: 129). SNSs such as Facebook and online sites are primarily designed to connect offline social relations to online. Baym states that:

[O]nline groups are often woven into fabric of off-line life... The evidence includes the pervasiveness of offline contexts in online interaction... (1998: 63 quoted in Lister *et al*, 2003: 168).

Identities online can also be expressed in relation to the offline world, in that, “one’s identity emerges from whom one knows, one’s associations and connections” (Turkle, 1995: 258).

Consequently, people's online activities can reflect their offline relations. Facebook users negotiate their relationships and identities through an array of activities using the features and application the site offers and these activities are engaged with in relation to their offline experiences.

The study of Facebook usage enables one to explore the contested nature of identity construction and its implications on the maintenance of offline and online social relationships and identity. The ways in which identity is constructed and experienced online is not radically different from how identity operates in the offline social world. Ginger argues that the "foundations of identity do not drastically change in the Facebook realm...social identity remains strongly in place, but instead may be mediated in new ways" (2008: 36). While the technology or interface determines what kinds of representations people can construct, whatever the limitations of the interface, the interface is still able to mediate identity and reflect the offline identities. Identities are also constructed and framed with an audience in mind but when online, this audience is invisible (Ginger, 2008: 120). People are conscious of who is viewing their online constructions and thus, they actively construct the ideal self formation in line with how they want to be perceived. Therefore, the online construction of the self is influenced by the individual's offline social identities or subjective positions.

There have been criticisms levelled against the authenticity of online identities and representations in social research. Authenticity of online identities is challenged on the basis that while online, the physical body is absent or becomes disembodied (Lister *et al*, 2003: 368). Disembodiment means that "we can be interactively present to each other as unanchored textual bodies without being proximate or visible as definite physical objects" (Slater, 1998: 91). Research on Facebook has also questioned whether the use of the SNS encourages authentic or inauthentic identity construction. For example, a study on identity authenticity on Facebook found that the "use of Facebook does not promote authentic identity construction" (Wollam, 2008: 5). This study concluded that Facebook persuades "oneself and others to falsely perceive the communicator...Facebook circumvents the appropriate communicative praxis for establishing an authentic self, and therefore provides an inauthentic, or false, sense of identity" (Wollam, 2008: 7). The authenticity of online identities has also been questioned because of "the restrictive nature of the technologies

involved [which] cannot convey all of the nuances of face to face communication” (Ginger, 2008). However, Ginger asserts that even offline constructions and representations are not always authentic and people have to be critical and suspicious of any representation whether it exists either offline or online (2008: 34). Although the authenticity of some of the representations on Facebook is questionable, these constructions have real effects on its users. For example, as the Thomas Theorem states “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas 1928: 572, quoted in Ginger, 2008: 24) and this captures the authenticity of Facebook representations to those who use the interface.

Offline fragments and elements are taken online into Facebook, in reflecting the offline social world, the user’s profile becomes an “idealized self-presentation for some, and an exorbitant inside joke for others” (Ginger, 2008: 35). The process of self presentation becomes a project in which people invest much of their time to construct and signal ideal representations of the self. During the construction and performance of social identity and relationships, the profile changes “from being a static representation of self to a communicative body” (boyd and Heer, 2006: 1), where users give off identity cues to others. Ginger states that on Facebook:

Users develop an accurate vision of their identity online, visualizing it and custom tailoring their profile to their heart’s content. Users ...regulate their privacy settings and manage their profiles to ensure they create exactly the audience they would like to have. (2008: 36)

Not only can users’ profiles implicitly signal their identity through the posted pictures, but identity can also be explicitly signalled through the biographical narrative. Identities are also implicitly expressed through group membership or non-membership, posting on walls, status updates and relationship announcements. Similarly, Ginger states that participation “in applications, on pages, groups, and through the use of events can also overtly or covertly express identity” (2008: 36). The representations on Facebook are integrated with and relate to users’ sense self as members of various social formations and by acting as a “successful bridge between offline and online relationships, Facebook carries many natural social contexts with it” (Ginger, 2008: 36). This relationship between offline relations and online performance discussed by Ginger relates to this study which also seeks to explore how the students’ Facebook representations overtly or covertly signal their identities. This usage of

Facebook relates to and supports the theoretical position which asserts that online performances are influenced by offline social relations and identities.

In society, culture and identity are interrelated. Identities are formed, negotiated and expressed through culture. Culture is defined as “the distinctive ‘way of life’ of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life” (Clarke *et al*, 1976: 10). In developing and expressing their identities, people rely on language and “culturally available resources in their immediate social networks and in society as a whole” (Frosh, 1999: 413). Ginger argues that “language and culture become ways of creating distance or barriers between “locations” on Facebook” (2008: 39), and furthermore, “the ways social identity is shaped on Facebook ... could be similar to those in the face-to-face world” (2008: 40). Online representations on Facebook signal the users’ offline socio-cultural identities and as Thompson argues, lived socio-cultural experiences and mediated symbolic materials define, influence and increasingly nourish the self-formation (1995, 207). Thus, socio-cultural representations on Facebook can point to how users construct and conduct themselves in relation to their offline socio-cultural norms. This is relevant to this research in that it relates to how the students’ subject experiences inform their identity performances on Facebook. This discussion speaks to the dystopian position which argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between online use and the offline world.

3.4 Studies which have theorised the social role of Facebook

There is a considerable body of research which has theorised the role of online social networks. These studies are particularly informed by the theoretical position which asserts that offline experiences influence online performances and these online representations reflect the deeper social issues and practices inherent in the offline world. The studies chosen in this section discuss how online activities are inextricably linked to the offline world, identity and how identity has been discussed in relation to SNSs in general and Facebook in particular. Research on the use of Facebook at Michigan State University shows a strong association with the maintenance or solidification of existing offline relationships (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 1). The study examines the use of Facebook by undergraduate students and “its relationship to social capital formation and maintenance, integration into college life, and

psychological well-being” (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 1). The study argues that Facebook constitutes a platform where offline connections migrate online “where they can be maintained easily and perhaps deepened in part due to the depth of personal information provided by the site” (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 1). The study also found out that students “join virtual groups based on common interests, see what classes they have in common, and, via the profile, learn each others’ hobbies, interests, musical tastes, and romantic relationship status” (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 1), information which helps them to maintain offline bonds and strengthen social ties.

Early research on SNSs and online communities argued that individuals using these interfaces would be connecting with those outside their pre-existing social group or location, thus liberating individuals to form communities around shared interests, as opposed to shared geography (Wellman *et al*, 1996 quoted in Ellison *et al*, 2006: 4). This utopian perspective presumed that the Internet and its interfaces would “liberate interpersonal relationships from the confines of physical locality and create opportunities for new personal relationships and communities” (Rheingold 1993, quoted in Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 4). SNSs and online communities can connect people with those outside their pre-existing social group or geography, these “online communities [also] present opportunities for people in a common offline community to extend their interaction” (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 4). This is in line with the assertion that Facebook use shows a strong association with the extension, maintenance or strengthening of existing offline relationships (Ellison *et al*, 2006: 1). Although acknowledging the benefits of SNSs, the study’s findings did not support the utopian claims that SNSs “revolutionize society for the better...bringing together disparate people from around the world [and] allow relationships to flourish in an environment of equality and respect” (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3).

There are other studies which have interrogated the relationship between offline and online identities, examining how offline identities are subsequently performed and managed online. For example, a study conducted in 2006-2007 at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign examines the ways undergraduate students construct and perform their identities on Facebook and “how they manage their digital identity as compared to their face to face identity” (Ginger, 2008: 50). The study also explores students’ perceptions on the Facebook environment, and “how the management of their digital identity compares to the way they

disclose information about themselves in the everyday face-to-face world” (Ginger, 2008: 9). Ginger’s study is premised on the symbiotic relationship between the offline social world and the online social networks. Consequently, the “foundations of identity do not drastically change in the Facebook realm...social identity remains strongly in place, but instead may be mediated in new ways” (Ginger, 2008: 36). One of the major findings of the study is that Facebook resembles the offline life and “the level of personal identity information people share on Facebook is pretty similar to what they do in the face to face world” (Ginger, 2008: 78). The students share and express personal information, such as their relationships status, religious and political views and sexuality with their friends and family (Ginger, 2001: 71).

Similarly, a study investigating the usage of a Danish SNS, Arto, by a group of youths, shows that the performance of identity online is inextricably linked to the offline social world. The study investigates “how young people maintain friendships and thereby continuously construct and co-construct their identity online” (Larsen, 2005: 1). Larsen further argues that “social networking sites can be seen as a continuation of young people’s everyday (offline) lives for which reason the majority of them strive to be as sincere as possible-in short to be themselves” (Larsen, 2005: 1). Identities on Arto are performed through the picture gallery, comments in the gallery, profile descriptions of the self and descriptions from friends. The comments and descriptions from friends help to confirm, constantly acknowledge and reassure friendships and this performance is part of young people’s identity construction (Larsen, 2005: 14).

Studies by Ginger and Larsen are in line with the theoretical underpinnings which assert that the use of SNSs shows a strong association with maintaining or solidifying existing offline relationship. Although these two studies acknowledge the potential of SNSs in creating new relationships, the studies are primarily concerned with exploring the relationship between offline relations or experiences and how these lived experiences are performed online. Both studies therefore, relate to my research which also seeks to explore how students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds experience the Rhodes University social space and consequentially how they use Facebook.

Scholarship on the relationship between social identity and Facebook considers the middle and upper-middle classes to be the early users of Facebook² and has thus been concerned with exploring how these early adopters use the network (boyd, 2008). This is because of the nature of Facebook's creation and early exclusive uptake by students from Harvard and other Ivy League colleges that mapped Facebook as an "elite" social network site (boyd, 2008: 103). In a study investigating how American teens negotiate identity, boyd found that teen participation in SNSs "is rarely divorced from offline peer culture; teens craft digital self-expressions for known audiences and they socialize almost exclusively with people they know" (2008: 3). This study explores how MySpace and Facebook became a "digital turf on which teens' struggles for status and identity play out" (boyd, 2008: 211). The study found deep divisions in membership between MySpace and Facebook along the lines of race, class and educational level which reflects real offline structural conditions (boyd, 2008: 197) (see also boyd's forthcoming study on how the use of SNSs has become racialised³). boyd's study further suggests that these online divisions, which mirror broader offline structural divisions surrounding social categories, are still persistent in schools today (2008: 205). boyd's study supports the theoretical position which claim that the use of SNSs show a strong association with maintaining or solidifying existing offline relationship.

3.5 Rhodes University study: situating local Facebook usage within global scholarship

While there has been considerable scholarship arguing that Facebook has been dominated by elite white or Asian people from families with higher education (Hargittai, 2007, quoted in boyd, 2008: 203-204), the trend has changed rapidly since the site's inception. The popularity and uptake of Facebook by students from disadvantaged backgrounds at Rhodes University provides a compelling opportunity to study the relationship between social identity and social networks. The point of departure for my research, taken from boyd's study, is that Facebook usage has been adopted by students from disadvantaged social backgrounds and is no longer the exclusive social space for the elite or white people. My study specifically investigates

² For example, boyd's (2007) study "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace" explores the relationship between class background and the uptake of two Social Networking Sites Facebook and MySpace.

³ boyd (forthcoming) White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook.

how students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who are studying at Rhodes University use Facebook.

3.6 Conclusion

The chapter explored some of the theories regarding the nature of social identity. It argues that identity involves the perception of the self (internal identity) but this self perception is always performed in relation to others (collective identity). It is also argued in the chapter that the self holds and negotiates multiple and often contradictory identities owing to the various lived experiences and mediated symbolic materials which the self is exposed to. Facebook usage provides the platform to explore how these multiple identities which are constructed offline are represented and performed online. The chapter also explored the literature on SNSs that has particularly theorised the social role of Facebook in the context of offline social relationships and social identity. It discussed identity and identity performances on Facebook, arguing that the performances of identity online are inextricably linked to the offline world and that the offline world anchors and helps to authenticate online identity performances. The chapter then examined and reviewed relevant literature which focuses on identity, identity performance and identity management on Facebook and studies which have theorised the social role of Facebook. The section on literature review also discussed some of these previous studies in light of the theoretical insights which inform this study.

Chapter 4: Youth and education in South Africa and the context of research

4.1 Introduction

The chapter discusses the relationship between youth and education in South Africa to contextualise the research participant's educational background. It further explores the relationship between social class and educational background in relation to students' sense of belonging and alienation at institutions of higher education. Also discussed is the university's brief history, institutional and social culture in an attempt to contextualise Rhodes University as the research site. This history and spatial context are central to situating current campus offline-online relations. Three studies carried out at Rhodes University which explore the institutional and social culture and how students from marginal backgrounds experience the campus social life will be discussed and these studies inform this thesis.

The chapter also discusses the Extended Studies Programme (ESP) and the experiences of students on this programme. These students who are from former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools are the primary research subjects and their experiences on the Rhodes University campus inform this study. The chapter explores how representations on Facebook are linked to offline social patterns of behaviour. Examined here are offline extra mural activities such as church attendance, going to bars or shebeens, volunteer work or student activism, residence related activities, student societies and other culturally related activities. These are linked to how online identity is performed and expressed through different activities in relation to users' identities. This supports the dystopian position which argues that online performances are influenced by offline relations and the online representations reflect the deeper social issues and practices inherent in the offline world.

4.2 Youth and education

South Africa is a society with a range of intrinsic problems that affect its youth. Among the legacies and policies of apartheid, has been the marginalisation of black youth, educationally, socially and economically (Truscott and Milner, 1994:38-39). These policies grossly affected essential rights such as the youths' access to education. In an essay on the legacy of apartheid, economist Francis Wilson notes that "the destructive impact of the "Bantu Education" system wrought damage that will take decades if not generations to repair"

(quoted in Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 52) (see Kallaway, 2002 on the history of education under apartheid). During apartheid, there was a separate government department for each racial group and each respective department had different resources, curriculum and funding available:

The Department of Education and Training (DET) served Africans in the townships [and homelands], the House of Representatives (HOR) coloured students, the House of Delegates (HOD) Indian students, and the House of Assembly (HOA) white students. (Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 88)

This system changed before the advent of democracy. In 1992, the government converted “virtually all former white schools to Model C Schools. Such schools were eligible for state subsidies but had to raise the rest of their budgets through fees and donations (Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 51). However, the system was still discriminatory, as “the percentage of black students in each Model C school was capped at 50 percent” (Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 51). The system subsequently changed in 1994 when the newly democratically elected government abolished discriminatory policies within the educational system.

The current education system is still very much affected by the apartheid legacy. While it is still divided, although not explicitly along racial lines, it is significant to note that:

[F]ormer African townships schools still serve only African students, the former coloured schools serve mainly coloured students along with some African students, the former Indian schools serve mainly Indian and some coloured students, and the formerly white schools are the most mixed. (Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 89) (see Van de Berg, 2001 on the racial integration of schools)

Though the system has changed, former Model C schools [and private schools] still have the most qualified and experienced teachers and the best educational resources. This is because the schools are allowed to supplement the government subsidies with fees payable by the parents. Former HOR schools, still have relatively poor infrastructure and facilities. Former DET schools are by far the worst. The status quo at former DET and rural schools is demonstrated by an acute lack of resources, such as qualified teachers and textbooks and

amenities such as classroom facilities and toilets (Fiske and Ladd, 2004: 55) and this affects students' educational performance.

Although the government has steadily increased its budget spending on education, usually around 20% of total government expenditure (www.southafrica.info), there is still more work that needs to be done to redress the effect of inequalities. It is against this educational backdrop that this study focuses on the students who make up the respondents in this study. They all came through the DET school system briefly discussed above.

4.3 Relationship between social class and educational background and sense of belonging/alienation at institutions of Higher Education

There is a strong relationship between educational background and social class. Bates and Riseborough argue that “young people from different social classes do not attend the same types of educational institution...young working class people experience poorer conditions, and receive fewer resources” (Archer *et al*, 2003: 5). However, when students from different social and educational backgrounds meet at a previously segregated institution such as Rhodes University, this socio-cultural milieu becomes a contested site where identities and social relationships are negotiated. Institutions of higher education provide a context to interrogate and discuss social class, college belonging, marginalisation and adjustment because they have “class- (and gender-, race-, and ability-) based markers that define, implicitly or explicitly, who “belongs” and who does not” (Ostrove and Long, 2007: 365). Archer *et al* argue that working-class families experience more economic constraints and thus, “educational choices operate as a medium of power and stratification, within which there is an interplay of social, economic, cultural capital with institutional and family habitus” (2003: 17). Thus, for people from working class or historically socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, higher education is a means of differentiation within the class. Education becomes a tool for socio-economic mobility.

Social class background and childhood experiences construct a sense of belonging and adjustment at learning institutions although this sense of belonging can be hindered by family financial problems (Ostrove and Long, 2007: 369). Thus, students' social identities and sense of belonging are influenced by the socio-economic and cultural capital that they possess to

navigate and negotiate social relationships. The ways in which “group identification facilitates or inhibits a sense of belonging to a particular community or group” (Ostrove and Long, 2007: 364) mutually depends on the experiences of the individual members and their willingness to engage in such identity affirming activities.

Kingston and Lewis argue that feelings of alienation and estrangement are particularly acute at “elite schools because the schools themselves serve as cultural markers for belongingness” (1990a quoted in Ostrove and Long, 2007: 366). While obviously not a school, recent studies continue to identify the Rhodes University campus as an “elite” institution which is still highly divided along racial, class and social lines (Goga, 2009). It is easy to assume that increased cultural, class and racial contact lead to high social cohesion (see Vincent, 2008 on inter racial contact). For example, at Rhodes University there has been increased ‘racial’ contact; current statistics show that “White students make up 45% of the total student population, African constituted 46%, Indian contributed 5% and Coloured students composed 4% of the total student population” (Rhodes University Digest of Statistics, 2009: C1-A2). However, the sense of belonging depends on the students’ subjective experiences and cannot be accounted for by statistics. These subjective experiences and how social identities are performed can only be explained through discussions with respective students.

4.4 Rhodes University: The research site and dominant institutional and social cultures

The Rhodes University campus is situated at Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. The University had 6 980 registered students in the 2009 academic year (Rhodes University Digest of Statistics, 2009: A2-A3). The staff complement at Rhodes University reflects the racial discrepancy highlighted in the student population. According to the university’s Digest of Statistics, 78 % of the academic staff in the year 2008 was White, 3, 3 % Indian, 5 % Coloured and 14 % African (2009: G3). Conversely, the service and support was black, constituting 100 % in both the academic departments and residences (Rhodes University Digest of Statistics, 2009: C1-A2).

The University has been trying to equalise racial representation to account for past racial disproportionate representation. The Digest of Statistics states that, “the university intends to reduce the proportion of white students but not at the expense of quality and neither with a

decrease in white headcounts” (2009: C Tables). Rhodes University aims to create a socially inclusive and racially balanced community reflected through the residential system. The Digest of Statistics notes that the University:

[S]trives to ensure a homely and secure environment...The racial composition of the residential system reflects the racial composition of the student body... [to ensure] that no residence becomes filled with a certain race or financial class of students. (2009: A2-A3)

Many universities mention their student bodies as communities in themselves. Rhodes University also describes its residences as “homely” and its students and staff members as a family or as part of a “community”. However, the question to pose is; how do students feel about being members of their university and its culture? This culture has been identified by recent studies and the university itself as deeply divided and alienating. The Equity Policy of 2004, dedicated to changing the ‘institutional culture’ includes the section on ‘Change and a Culture of Inclusivity’:

To ensure the effective implementation of the policy, change in the culture, values and practices of the University are necessary. Such change recognises that certain inequities do exist within the University as a result of Apartheid practices and that these have contributed to a culture that is experienced by some staff and students as alienating

<https://www.ru.ac.za/documents/Institutional%20Planning/equitypolicy.pdf>).

Although Rhodes University admits that the embedded ‘institutional culture’ is a problem, the perception is often understood as a result of external forces, such as imprudent individual or group agency or “(apartheid), rather than internally generated and regenerated” (Goga, 2009: 12). Goga questions if there is a need to interrogate social practices in institutional life, particularly dominant identity-producing practices?” (2009:23) Certainly the need exists, and this study goes further than investigating how campus relations and experiences of a specific group of marginal students play out but also how these offline social relations in turn inform the students’ online activities on Facebook.

Previous studies have identified the Rhodes University campus as deeply divided along racial, class and social lines. The university has historically been home to white middle and upper class students. It is hardly surprising that students from marginal educational and social backgrounds would experience feelings of marginalisation and estrangement. In the “Homeland” study, Strelitz (2005:112-113) argued that the nightly ritual of television viewing was used by ex-DET students to affirm their marginalised identities in opposition to what they perceived as the dominant middle-class norms on campus. Similarly, quantitative and qualitative research carried out by Strelitz points to deep divisions among students along lines of race and class (2005: 52). In particular, previous research has argued that students coming from former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools, characterised by poor education resources and amenities, often represent a marginalised minority on the Rhodes University campus. Their drawing together demonstrated their mutual support of issues of importance to them, such as the use of the home language and the traditional practises and behaviours. For many of these students, the institutional culture is dominated by middle-class norms and thus they experienced Rhodes University as an alien environment (Strelitz, 2005:110-111). This feeling of estrangement, it was argued, was exacerbated by the students’ relatively weak command of the English language and their poor preparedness for university education (Strelitz, 2005:113).

Goga (2009) argues that ‘whiteness’ at Rhodes has “continued successfully to contest ownership of the university’s institutional space and to perpetuate thereby its hegemony” (www.ru.ac.za/politics). In addition, the pervasive and dominant Rhodes student culture and identity is also defined by “drinking practices and performances... [Which] communicate what it means to truly and authentically be a ‘student of Rhodes’” (Goga, 2009: 57). The institutional identity is performed through students interacting with and internalising the hegemonic student practices which reinforces the dominant culture and identity.

It is arguable that some of the actions that define what it is being a ‘Rhodent’ are unconsciously internalised through rituals that conventionalize and unconsciously orientate people to the acceptance of a particular social identity (Goga 2009: 57). For example, the annual Inter Varsity (formerly Tri Varsity) sporting event pitting Rhodes against three other universities provides the ideal milieu for the expression of hegemonic institutional identities.

Rhodes students fuse “the ‘drinking culture’ with the institutional identity...through [the] powerful symbolic appropriation of the colour purple, which signifies institutional representivity” (Goga, 2009: 71).

Another ‘ritual’ that marks hegemonic student identity is the problematic ‘drinking culture’ at Rhodes University (Young and de Klerk, 2007: 2). This deep seated culture has continued to manifest and express itself, thereby becoming a dominant culture if not a definitive student culture. However, Young and de Klerk note that “students from less privileged backgrounds do not form part of the so-called ‘drinking cultures’” (2007: 11) owing to various socio-cultural and economic reasons. Against the backdrop of this assertion, this study investigates how students from marginal socio-educational backgrounds experience or respond to some of these dominant culture(s) and how these offline experiences reflect on their online activities and representations on Facebook.

4.4.1 Extended Studies Programme

The Department of Education (DOE) offered funding for the foundation studies in 2004 and “the original purpose of which was to increase enrolments of black South Africans” (Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report, 2010: 11). Boughey asserts that “initially the focus was on educational disadvantage and students were recruited from former DET schools” (Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report, 2010: 11). However, the recruitment criteria has changed and the ESPs are now open to “learners with potential, from a more diverse range of educational, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, whose disadvantaged background may have hindered their school leaving performance” (Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report, 2010: 11-12).

The class dimension and educational background of students on the ESP is highlighted in the Review Report:

Given the fact that there is still a very strong congruence between race, place, socio-economic background and quality of schooling, it is very likely that the majority of students within the ESPs will be Black, [who] come from working class families and probably be the first family member to attend a university. Most will come from

former DET schools...and as a result, the group is likely to be relatively homogeneous (2010: 13).

4.4.2 The ESP student experience and social identity

The Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Panel conducted interviews with groups of students who had been through each of the ESPs and “in all cases the students appreciated the benefits of the ESP and spoke positively about the support, the emphasis on skills (essay writing and use of computers)...” (2010: 20). However, the Review Report also noted that:

In many cases, the students acknowledged an initial feeling of alienation and marginalisation and questioned why they were in the ESP. Some students spoke about a feeling of being perceived as less capable intellectually than other students and some spoke of the ESPs as the “slow stream”. (2010: 20)

The Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report, (2010: 21) foregrounds issues affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds noting that “identity and labelling of Extended Studies students [were] identified as central to the student experience and [will be] be addressed through a system-wide approach. The university has however, been proactive in trying to address the marginalisation and identity issues affecting these students, but the issues are still deeply embedded in the student social relations.

4.4.3 Rhodes University: where offline meets the online

Rhodes University is an ideal space to investigate the relationship between the offline and online social identities. This social space allows students from different socio-economic backgrounds to mix and offers opportunities to interrogate how students experience the institutional social space and how their social experiences impact on the ways in which they are able to signal their various identities online and offline. This thesis investigates how a group of students from historically or currently disadvantaged backgrounds, on the ESP experience this social space and how their experiences impact on their use of Facebook.

Students at Rhodes University are encouraged to join various social and community groups, sports clubs or engage themselves in several extracurricular activities to enhance their sense of belonging. Students living in residences belong to a specific house and there are various houses around a central dining hall and recreational space (www.ru.ac.za). University

residences provide a social milieu where students are potentially able to cultivate a variety of social relationships. However, these social relationships and their implications for the construction of identity do not materialise merely by belonging or not belonging to the same residence, but through a complex array of identity defining and signalling processes which influence how students gravitate towards each other in the different campus social spaces.

There are over sixty student societies on campus and an equally wide range of sporting clubs. Throughout the year, the university runs the “Inter Res sports program... in which residences [including off campus students] compete against each other in about 25 - 27 different sporting codes” (www.ru.ac.za). This programme is meant to cultivate a spirit of camaraderie through sport, thereby invoking a sense of belonging and adjustment for students. Students also frequent various clubs, pubs and sports bars on campus and outside campus to socialise, and these spaces are identity markers in themselves.

There are other socialising spaces within which students engage in activities that help them to construct and affirm their identities. The activities include church attendance, going to bars or shebeens, volunteer work or student activism and residence related activities such as watching TV or listening to music together. Such extra mural activities are as important as the student groups and societies.

These offline social resources and social patterns of behaviour discussed above are related to and expressed on Facebook. The Rhodes University Facebook network hosts activities which are inextricably linked to offline social relations. The network has steadily grown and there are currently 6 005 people on the network (www.facebook.com/editaccount.php?networks). Network members are grouped according to their status such as undergraduate, graduate student, faculty staff, alumnus, and class year. There are various online groups and activities within the network which reflect offline social experiences. The groups and other activities are linked to the various offline social relations, societies, sporting clubs, social groups and even belonging to the same houses or halls or residence.

4.5 Conclusion

The chapter explored the relationship between youth and the history of the South African educational system. A brief history of the South African educational system situates and helps to explain the existing social relations within the context of the study. The chapter then examined the relationship between educational background and sense of belonging at institutions of higher learning as this influences the nature of social relations on campus. A discussion of Rhodes University as the research site was linked to previous studies conducted on the Rhodes campus, which highlight the dominant institutional and social culture and how students from marginal socio-educational backgrounds experience the campus social life. These studies have identified Rhodes as an “elite” institution where students from disadvantaged backgrounds grapple with marginalisation. These students include students on the ESPs, and the chapter explored how students on the ESPs experience Rhodes. Finally, the various social and cultural activities available to students on and around campus were described.

Chapter 5: Research Methods, Procedures and Techniques

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the research methods and procedures that are used in this study and discusses the use of a qualitative research approach as the primary method of data collection. It also describes how online data, collected from the research subjects' Facebook profiles, relates to the participants' offline experiences. This chapter further examines the traditions of qualitative research and argues for the usefulness of qualitative research methods for this study. The study employs in-depth individual interviews, focus group interviews and online data collected from participants' profiles as the data collection methods.

5.2 Objectives and goals of the research

The primary goal of this research is to examine the use of Facebook by marginalised students at the Rhodes University campus as a means of reflecting on the claims made by utopian and dystopian positions to understanding the relationship between online and offline relationships. In addition, this form of social networking is analysed in relation to online and offline identities and social relationships. The relationship between the offline and online is explored by examining how social identities are expressed and negotiated through Facebook use in light of the associated offline social relations.

By exploring how Facebook as a virtual agora offers a space for the negotiation of identities, a key question that the study raises is: in what ways are users expressing their identities online in relation to their offline identities and social experiences? In order to understand how the research subjects use Facebook within the Rhodes University social context, it was necessary to interview them, collect and analyse their Facebook activities.

5.3 Qualitative research methodology

This study is primarily concerned with human subjects and their subjective experiences within a specific spatio-temporal context, and how these experiences inform the subjects' online activities on Facebook. Consequently, a qualitative research approach provides the most useful and appropriate orientation, as it affords the researcher the opportunity to fully

explore diverse human feelings, views, subjective positions and experiences (Bryman, 1988: 13-15).

A qualitative research approach foregrounds social experiences as essential to understanding social 'reality'. The qualitative research methodology generally acknowledges the essential difference between the social world and the scientific one, recognising that human experiences comprise a whole range of subjective views, feelings, observations and attitudes which constitute social meaning (Babbie and Mouton, 1989: 270-272) (see also Deacon *et al*, 2007: 5-6). Thus in employing a qualitative research approach, this study is concerned with exploring these social meanings and how they influence the social world of the research subjects. Qualitative research is also "based on a relativistic, constructivist ontology that posits that there is no objective reality. Rather, there are multiple realities constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest" (Krauss, 2005: 760). As a result, "knowledge is established through the meanings attached to the phenomena studied" (Krauss, 2005: 759). Similarly, interpretive research is concerned with meaning making and seeks to understand social actors' definition of a situation (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Interpretivism is also concerned with the fundamental features of shared meaning and understanding of social actors (Gephart, 1999).

Qualitative researchers have always been concerned with studying human actions from the perspective of the social actors themselves within a specific context (Babbie and Mouton, 1989: 270). Qualitative researchers acknowledge that social 'realities' are embodied within the social actors themselves. Accordingly, when doing qualitative research, the researcher and the research instruments are often inseparable, with the researcher being the interviewer, or observer, as opposed to employing quantitative techniques, where the research instrument may be a survey or questionnaire and the subjects may never meet the researcher. The major advantage of qualitative research, for this study, lies in its ability to provide complex data of how people experience a given research issue within a given context. In this study, the thick descriptions are gleaned from the subjective experiences of a group of Rhodes University students and the study explores how lived campus social experiences impact on the subjects' online practices on Facebook. It is through the use of a flexible research approach that takes

into account peoples' subjective understanding of the world from their perspectives that social meanings can begin to be understood (Bryman, 1988: 8).

5.4 Research techniques chosen: focus group interviews, in-depth individual interviews, and online data collection

There are various qualitative research methods which researchers can employ depending on the objectives of the study. These techniques include focus groups, interviews, observation, ethnography, field studies and phenomenological research. Focus group interview techniques have been part of the current drift towards the use of qualitative methods in media research (Hansen *et al*, 1998: 259). For this study, the research methods included conducting focus groups and individual interviews and collecting online data.

5.4.1 Focus group interviews

Focus groups characteristically involve bringing together small groups of people to discuss a defined topic (Deacon *et al*, 2007: 57). Focus groups have been popular in media research because they produce rich qualitative data suited to detailed interpretive analysis (Hansen, 1998: 281). Focus groups offer an opportunity for intimate interaction and can provoke discussion in a way that an individual interview cannot (Morgan, 1997: 11).

Most focus groups consist of between 6 and 12 people convened to talk about their experiences, views or opinions on a chosen subject. The size of the group should be carefully considered. It should not be too large as this can hinder participation by most members nor too small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an individual interview (Merton *et al*, 1990: 137). However, the number of participants will depend on the objectives of the study; thus smaller groups of between 4 and 6 people are preferable when the participants share a lot about the topic or have had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic being discussed (Kreuger, 1988:94). In this light, I chose small groups of between 4 and 6 people for the three focus group interviews I conducted. This is because the research subjects had similar experiences in terms of educational and social background and all of them had been through or were still on the Extended Studies Programme (discussed in previous chapters). The advantage of having a small number within a group made it easier for me to conduct the interviews and identify the research subjects by name. I quickly got

acquainted with the participants because of the small sample size which made the interview more comfortable for them.

According to Silverman, focus group interviews are “useful in working with severely disadvantaged, hard-to reach social groups, people who may be uncomfortable with individual interviews but happy to talk with others particularly others they already know” (2004: 181). Indeed, when I first approached subjects coming from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to set up individual interviews, they were apprehensive about taking part, but said they preferred to partake in the study alongside their friends. Some of these students confessed that when they came to Rhodes University, they could not speak English proficiently. Thus, being part of a focus group would make them comfortable and feel at ease rather than being individually interviewed. This worked to the advantage of the study because in creating a suitable environment for the research subjects, the participants felt at ease and the discussions flowed without any notable setbacks. The fact that I am Zimbabwean did not impact on my interaction with these students. Since I had made contact with most of the participants before the interviews and most of them knew me, our relationship during the interviews was cordial.

5.4.2 Conducting the interviews: sampling and recruitment of groups

The sampling and recruitment of subjects for the focus group interviews was satisfactory. I did a pilot study to establish the feasibility of the research and conducted some informal interviews with a number of the extended studies students. The subjects of the pilot study were willing to take part in the actual research and they also referred me to their friends who were also able and willing to be interviewed. I gained the trust of the friends which made sampling and recruitment easier rather than randomly approaching them.

Common to all qualitative sampling procedures is that selection of sample units is consciously shaped by the research agenda (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 54). For this study, the agenda is to understand the correlation between offline identity, social relationships or experiences and the subsequent influence of the offline experiences on the subjects’ online practices. For this reason, participants were selected purposively using the snowball sampling method. The sample is primarily students who are on or had been through the ESPs or had attended former DET schools and are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The sample

group is not representative of the general student population but reflects a specific group of students. This sampling strategy is in line with the assertion that media studies research has rarely sought to obtain groups representative of the general population as is characteristic of most qualitative research (Hansel *et al*, 1998: 265). Instead, this sampling strategy is keen to explore a specific issue or case in its context and not to provide generalised data.

5.4.3 Interview setting

The decision to choose a venue for the interviews was reached after taking into consideration the sample size. It had to be neutral and convenient so that participants would feel at ease. I chose to do the interviews in an office at the Africa Media Matrix because it was the most convenient venue to accommodate everyone. The office has a round table and it is spacious enough to accommodate five people. For the participants to be most comfortable, it would have been ideal to use a neutral venue. The interviews were conducted during swot week when students were preparing for the November final year exams. In light of this, I let the participants choose the date and time to conduct the interviews so as not to intrude on their study time tables. One group chose to have the interview during dinner time. Since I could not afford to pay people for their time, I only provided interviewees with dinner in the form of pizza and some soft drinks. The other two groups chose to have the interview at lunch time and I also provided refreshments using my own funds. The interviews lasted on average one and a half hours with a break in between.

5.4.4 The interview guide, my role as a moderator and problems encountered

I prepared an interview guide to provide direction for the interview process (see appendix 1). The questions were sub-divided into three sections which were biographical questions, questions around the participants' social experiences at Rhodes University and questions on the participants' activities online in relation to their offline identities and social experiences. The interview guide I used was based on the objectives of the study discussed in Chapter 1. My role was that of a facilitator or moderator of the discussion, giving direction to the conversation while allowing the group to do most of the talking and trying to ensure that everyone contributed equally (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 139-140).

The only significant drawback I experienced was that less confident interviewees were sometimes marginalised or silenced in group interviews. This was due to the fact that for some of the participants, English was not their first language and this impacted on the communication process. Thus, to try and counter this, I tried to use less technical terms and avoided using academic jargon and this worked because the students opened up as the interviews progressed. The issue of the language used to conduct the interviews did not negatively affect the interview process. All the participants were relatively fluent in English but when they said some words or phrases in their indigenous language, they would translate them into English. I decided not to use an interpreter because all the participants were fairly fluent in English and in my pilot study the students had said they were comfortable with doing the interviews in English. Employing an interpreter could have reinforced the assumption that these students are not comfortable with conversing in English. The discussions were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed.

5.5 In-depth individual interviews

I chose to conduct in-depth individual interviews to supplement the data I gathered through focus groups. Unlike focus group interviews, in-depth individual interviews are conducted with one individual to provide a more intensive conversation on the issue. The major advantage of this type of interviews is that:

[t]he individual interview may thus be the best choice for a researcher who wishes to illuminate a sensitive issue located beyond the discursive range of the socially acceptable or the politically correct – or an issue that is felt by the individual to be too sensitive to talk about in the presence of others, other than the researcher who grants the informant full anonymity. (Schroder *et al*, 2003: 53)

Consequently, conducting in-depth individual interviews ensured the exhaustive coverage of the questions and the negative possibility of ‘spirals of silence’ was effectively avoided. The research participants did not raise any objections or allude to the issue as sensitive or offensive. The other advantage of individual interviews was that I had the flexibility to ask questions and I intimately engaged with the individual participants.

I used the same sampling and recruitment procedures for the in-depth individual interviews as the focus groups sampling and recruitment procedures. The participants were selected purposively using the snowball sampling method, as discussed above. I used the same venue (office at the Africa Media Matrix) for both in-depth individual interviews and focus groups because of its convenience to the participants and because it was centrally located on campus. The individual interview interviewees did not take part in the focus group interviews, I assumed it would duplicate responses because the questions asked in both focus group and individual interviews were similar.

In total, I conducted four in-depth interviews and each interview lasted on average just over one hour. The discussions were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed.

5.6 Qualitative Internet research: online data collection

In order to explore the relationship between the subjects' offline social life and online experiences, I had to collect online data and analyse it in relation to the data gathered from focus groups and individual interviews. Online data are described as materials such as texts in the form of online postings, threads or links, images such as pictures or photos, online clips obtained using virtual methodologies (Orgad, 2009: 35). The decision to choose what type of online data to collect and analyse was influenced by the responses from the participants and the study's objectives. In line with the objectives of the study, I collected data from the profiles and online groups' users belong to and analysed the issues they had raised in group discussions boards. This analysis involved identifying the issues raised in some of the online discussions and examining how these pertinent issues relate to users' offline lived experiences and social identities. The groups, photos, and other Facebook activities speak to the participants' offline relations and identities, so collecting online data was crucial to make sense of the meanings the participants attached to both their offline social contexts and online engagement (Orgad, 2009: 35). Consequently, the online data collection methods and the interviews formed the basis on which I built my data gathering process.

5.7 Ethical considerations

Before conducting the interviews, I clearly explained to the participants what the study was about and its purpose. I made it clear to every participant that I would respect any request for

anonymity but none of the interviewees requested anonymity. Everyone whom I interviewed took part in the study out of their freewill without coercion. I explained to the participants that the recorded interviews will be kept on my personal computer in digital audio format for my academic use only. I assured them that the audio files would not be made available to any third party at anytime for other reasons. Every participant allowed me access to their Facebook profile and permitted me to collect and analyse any information on their Facebook profiles relevant to the study. However, there were some people I approached who declined for various reasons to take part in the study and their decision was respected.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the objectives of the study and examined the various research methods that were used in the process of data collection. The qualitative research methodological approach was adopted and reasons to justify why this approach was adopted were given. I discussed the specific techniques I employed, which were focus group interviews, in-depth individual interviews and online data collected from the participant's Facebook profiles. This chapter also discussed stages of the research process, sampling and recruiting procedures used. The steps followed in the data collection process were also discussed. I also briefly examined the ethical considerations and the problems encountered in planning and carrying out the research. The next chapter presents and analyses the findings of the study.

Chapter 6: Presentation and Interpretation of Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the interviews conducted with the selected Rhodes University students. It is divided into sections that provide a short biographical background of some of the participants to illustrate the relative homogeneity of the group. The chapter discusses the findings with regard to how the research participants experience Rhodes University's social space as members of the Extended Studies Programme (ESP).

6.2 Relative homogeneity: Sample background of participants

As already noted the purpose of the interviews was to investigate how students from former DET schools experience Rhodes University's social space and to explore the ways in which their use of Facebook reflects on their constitution of identities, testing the two theoretical approaches which inform the main research questions. For this reason I discuss briefly, the education and socio-economic background of the research participants in order to determine how this background contributes to the shaping of the way students experience Rhodes University's social space and subsequently the use of Facebook.

The research participants noted that they attended rural or township schools, these were formerly under the control of the Department of Education and Training (DET). Most of these students either still stay in rural areas or have strong roots in the rural areas. A few of the participants live in urban areas, but specifically in the townships:

Singotibusiwe: I'm from Venda in Limpopo. I grew up in Tshauli-Buluni extension in Venda, near Thohoyandou. It's a village in the rural area in Venda. The school that I went to is a rural DET school called Tondalushaka Secondary School. During my secondary schooling it was not easy my friend. In Buluni where I stayed, it was too far from school. We used to travel every day in the morning walking for about one hour. At times you had to cross rivers; you just had to get in the water. It's just that somebody can never think about it when I'm here at Rhodes. You will just think that this guy is from the township or peri-urban, while I'm from the rural area.

Khanyisile: I was born in rural Mpumalanga and I went to a rural school there and then I moved to a former Indian school. In terms of educational facilities it was good

but around 1999 or so it started to deteriorate because all the Indians had left and gone to private schools and they were basically the ones that contributed funds to help the school get along. By the time I left it was now like a rural school, there was overcrowding. In my Matric year we didn't have a teacher for history and most of the good teachers had left.

Pumela: I'm from Peddie and it's a very small town, it's like a rural area. I went to Knight Marambana High School. We paid 100 rand [school fees] for the whole year but sometimes we would not pay. It was a small school and we had problems with teachers.

Tshepo: I'm from Johannesburg, in Soweto and my school was in Soweto. The name of the school was Senaoane Secondary. Senaoane was very poor in terms of resources and the education was poor because you had to do things by yourself.

The students also attributed their problems, such as their relative poor command of the English language, to their poor educational background:

Ncebakazi: I'm from Butterworth. I went to a township school. I found it to be difficult because I was coming from the rural areas. When I was doing grade 1 to 9, everything was taught in Xhosa [indigenous language], even English even Maths, how to solve x , it was all in Xhosa.

The next section discusses the findings with regards to how the research participants experience the Rhodes University social space as members of the ESP.

6. 3 Student experiences of the Rhodes University social space in relation to their background
Since English is the primary medium of instruction at Rhodes University, many students identified their lack of proficiency as one of the major problems that they faced when they joined Rhodes:

Yanga: It was difficult adapting here especially coming from high school. I was like, I look like I'm the only one from the rural area here and everyone is like on a higher level than me. That was the problem and like I said English was the main problem. Being on Extended Studies helped a lot because you get to meet people from the same

background as you and now you are not on your own trying to adapt. In that group, you try to adapt as a group not on your own.

Similarly, another student noted that:

Zinathi: At first it was difficult to adjust and fit in. As Yanga has said, we were not exposed to speaking English all the time and then now at Rhodes, I knew that it was going to be a challenge. Even when attending lectures you have to use English, everything is in English.

The students also reported feelings of marginalisation and low self esteem for being part of the Extended Studies cohort:

Sibongiseni: You know when you come here at Rhodes and you are on Extended Studies, you tend to have low self esteem, you don't even speak in tuts [tutorials], because it's like oh, I'm from Extended Studies so I can't say anything right. The minute you are told you are on Extended Studies when you come here you tend to feel down and...[Murmurs of agreement from other participants]

The Extended Studies at Rhodes University Review Report addressed this particular issue and acknowledge that students experienced “an initial feeling of alienation and marginalisation and questioned why they were in the ESP” (2010: 21). Although the university and the students concerned acknowledged the usefulness of the ESP, the interviewed students spoke about feelings of being perceived as less capable intellectually than other students. The students also argued that they felt ostracised because of their background and initial poor command of English:

Philisiwe: It is useful being on Extended Studies, but socially being labelled as I don't know, dumb and all sorts of things.

Philisiwe: Academically it was quite useful. I would say it was language last year [that brought us together] most of us are Xhosa hey so we just became friends. [Rest of focus group give their agreement.]

Pumela: Mainstream people did sort of look down upon people on Extended Studies. So at times you think okay, so they think they are better than us.

Another student also noted that it was difficult to adapt and make friends because of his relative weak command of English:

Yanga: The social life was very difficult, I mean, it was not nice at the beginning of last year. It was the first time for me here speaking English [chuckles from the other interviewees]. In res, I was like there are no Xhosas, come-on who am I going to speak to. So that was a challenging part last year but you get used to it as the year goes by. But I am still adjusting.

In line with Strelitz's (2005) finding, the students identified Rhodes University as a racially divided space. They have all experienced some sort of implicit class and racial tensions and identified the residences and hangout spots as divided by race:

Khanyi: The social life is quite racial as you have your clearly white and clearly black areas. Friars [a nightclub] is for white and some confused black people [chuckles], Pirates [is a pizza place and sports bar] is for whites and EQ [Equilibrium is a nightclub] is for blacks and adventurous white people. But there are those clear lines even in residences there is a clear line... In Canterbury house we have two common rooms and one was termed the "black common room" because when the black girls went to sit in the big common room where the white girls usually sit, there was a problem. They just didn't jell very well.

Interviewer: What was the problem?

Khanyi: There are not explicit problems or complaints. At Rhodes racism is not spoken about. It's just a hush hush, under the carpet thing, but it happens.

In addition, the students argued that their cultures are not given primacy or the same currency as other cultures:

Khanyi: Expressing my culture at Rhodes is made to seem like a special and extraordinary phenomenon, for example, if there is a cultural event or if someone is wearing traditional Zulu or Swazi clothes. It's because it hasn't formed part of the communal culture and communal space. It hasn't been really allowed to be part of the normal culture. You cannot make something normal when every time it happens it's made extraordinary. If I wear my traditional Zulu wear, I attract stares and attention and people will question me as to why am I doing that?

The primary feeling expressed above is one of indignation that local black cultures are overshadowed by a hegemonic white English or Afrikaans culture. In this regard, Goga argues that ‘whiteness’ has continued successfully to contest ownership of the university’s institutional space and thereby invisibly perpetuate its hegemony (2008: 41). The discontent expressed by those from the disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds is therefore not surprising. These students are at odds with some of the dominant cultures at Rhodes University, as discussed by Goga in Chapter four. The following exchanges highlight the students’ opposition to these deeply embedded practices:

Ncebakazi: Drinking is a cultural thing here at Rhodes. During Tri-varsity [now called Intervarsity] it was [white] Rhodes students who were so drunk [laughter and murmurs of agreement from other interviewees]. Even if we have a function in the dining halls there is always alcohol, why? Even if it’s a braai, there is always alcohol, why? [Murmurs of agreement from others]

Sibongiseni: In order to have fun you don’t always have to drink alcohol. Why should there be alcohol in every occasion?

The next section explores the different ways in which identity is constructed and performed at Rhodes University in relation to the students’ social experiences discussed above.

6. 4 The performance of identity at Rhodes University

6.4.1 Traditional, religious and cultural experiences

Rhodes University is an interesting social milieu in which to explore how students from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate and perform their identities. As noted earlier, Rhodes University is a liberal and “elite institution” whose institutional and social space is dominated by hegemonic [modern middle class and white] cultural practices. Thus, students from backgrounds with strong traditional and rural roots often find themselves at odds with these and they tend to negotiate their personal and group identities in opposition to these commonplace and hegemonic practices. For example, the students noted that they do not subscribe to the Rhodes “drinking culture” and other “unAfrican” practices such as female smoking:

Sibongiseni: I was very shocked and surprised to see a black girl smoking in public. A black girl, especially Xhosa, I know in African cultures, you can't drink or smoke. [Murmurs of agreement from the other interviewees]

Philisiwe: It's a taboo for a girl to smoke; it's just a no no. I think Rhodes is just a liberal environment so people are free to do whatever they want.

The above discussion resonates with what Swartz defines as the “pedagogic influence of religious and cultural beliefs” (2009: 119) which teach youths what is right or wrong and inspire them to be good people. Culture and religion, specifically the Christian faith, is identified by most of these students as “a moral influence...faith being inspirational, pedagogic and exemplary” providing a moral code of behaviour (Swartz, 2009: 120).

As Swartz argues, the “moral influence of traditional beliefs and practices” (2009: 121) is pedagogic by teaching youths what is right, thereby providing a moral code of behaviour (Swartz, 2009: 120). For example, one of the groups at Rhodes the students identified as alien is OutRhodes, a student society which “celebrates the sexual orientation of all students with specific focus on the issues of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-gendered students” (www.ru.ac.za/societies/outrhodes).

Singotibusiwe: You know that society, OutRhodes. That one I can't even start to think about it. Even their notices or posters advertising something, I can't read them. It's because of the way my culture is and the way I have been raised. I believe that a man should not date a man. I don't hate them, but I don't want to be close to those guys, the guys who date each other, girls who date each other. In my Venda culture we don't believe in that, we shake hands, you don't kiss each other. Where I come from in Tshauli, I don't know anyone who is gay, but things are changing, I don't know. But you know Rhodes is so modern. You can do whatever you want and nobody can say anything.

Although Rhodes University is identified as a modern space, the students still uphold their traditional and cultural beliefs, such as their use of indigenous language, belief in culture or ancestors and respect for elders amongst others. Thompson (1995) discusses this tension

between tradition and modernity. He notes that traditions do not disappear but “will be sustained over time only if they are continuously re-embedded in new contexts and re-moored to new kinds of territorial unit” (Thompson, 1995: 187). The students’ social behaviour and choices reflect how tradition and religion is still relevant for them and how they ‘re-moor’ and ‘re-embed’ their traditional, religious and socio-cultural beliefs within a predominantly elite and modern institutional space. Thus, tradition or religion remains a fundamental part of the present influencing social action (Thompson, 1995: 183).

Youth and youth identity have to be understood as contingent on the meanings that are associated with “being young” in a particular space and place in time. What it means to be a young person from a ‘traditional’ background, whether urban or rural may be different to what it means to be young in a ‘modern’ and liberal context such as the Rhodes University campus:

Pumela: For white people, it’s very easy for them to drink, smoke and get drunk, for them it’s not something bad.

The different culturally contingent expectations determine social action. For example, for some of these students, being young is ideally signalled by respecting elders:

Khanyi: This is where it comes back to being traditional in a sense, there is a social hierarchy. I have been raised in a society like that. There are certain things that I can’t talk to my dad about. My dad can never know that I have a boyfriend, and stuff like that. There are things you just keep at a distance from your elders. I see lecturers and teachers as my elders. I don’t easily associate with older people. In my culture when there is an older person around you, you are there to answer their questions and still maintain a level of respect, you shouldn’t be comfortable. My relationships and practices in a way influence what I would do and who I relate to.

This discussion resonates with the notion of the ‘moral deficit’ of modernity which is defined as “incapacity to deal with certain questions of a fundamental kind concerning life and death, right and wrong, etc” (Thompson, 1995: 194). For many people, this ‘moral deficit’ has sustained a belief in the “continuing relevance of religious traditions” (Thompson, 1995: 194) amongst other traditional beliefs and values. Thus, for this student, her beliefs and values are

anchored in tradition and her subjective convictions help to determine whom she can associate and socialise with. Religion also provides students with a sense of identity, and the students socialise and gravitate towards each other based on their religious convictions. The relevance of religion highlights the “enduring significance of tradition (including religious tradition) as a means of nourishing a sense of identity and providing individuals with a sense of belonging” (Thomson, 1995: 194).

Identity is signalled in many ways including belonging to an in-group. In-group belonging is also a means of setting and ensuring that boundaries between self and others are signalled and secured. The signalling can be done explicitly, for example, by associating with people whose socio-cultural identity one shares, as stated below:

Sibongiseni: If I see that I don’t fit in, I select myself, I know that there are people I will fit in with. For example, I’m not an outgoing person, I don’t drink and I don’t go out.

The students asserted that it is through interacting in student societies that most people start to get along and get a sense of belonging and cultural awareness:

Yanga: I joined the isiXhosa society and they usually organise cultural events. We have some Xhosa related cultural events. For example during Heritage Day they organised an event where people were dancing Xhosa dances like *Umxhontso*. It’s a cultural dance where people sing and dance for fun. They also organise some food some Xhosa food like *Umxombothi*, African beer. I have made some friends from the society. I joined it because it’s Xhosa and I’m Xhosa and I’m proud of being Xhosa.

The students joined groups ranging from cultural groups, such as the Lesotho society and Xhosa society, to religion affiliated groups, such as the Methodist Society, Seventh Day Adventist and the Student Christian Organisation. These social groups enable students to incorporate themselves into the wider student body. However, despite these opportunities, the students who identified themselves as traditionalists argued that while they still have strong traditional roots, the Rhodes social space does not fully allow them to actively live out that culture:

Khanyi: Some people at Rhodes don't understand. It's not easy to come to Rhodes and engage with your tradition. There are much more people that believe in them [ancestors]. They are just not going to say it. To some extent it is because of the context which limits how you behave because of how other people would react.

6.4.2 The relationship between tradition and modernity: Reflexive nature of identity

Identities however are not dogmatically internalised and performed, as people reflect on their actions. Individuals continuously monitor their activities, “and such monitoring always has discursive features...agents are normally able, if asked, to provide [and explain] discursive interpretations of...the behaviour in which they engage in (Giddens, 1991: 35). It is this reflexive nature of identity that is identified as fundamental to meaning making. Nevertheless, this reflexive process is always performed within the bounds of society and culture, with societal norms acting as the standard regulating social action. Against this backdrop, these students at Rhodes University reflexively negotiate their social actions, falling back on their cultural resources to give meaning to social actions. While, as some of the students have argued, drinking alcohol and the wearing of trousers by women and other practices are an individual choice, this choice is exercised in relation to others depending on the social context. As Thompson argues, people “integrate elements of tradition with new styles of living. Tradition is not necessarily abandoned... [it is] reshaped, transformed, perhaps even strengthened and invigorated through the encounter with other ways of life” (1995: 192).

Similarly, the students also integrate elements of tradition and religion with new living styles experienced at Rhodes University. Rather than coming into conflict with the elements of modernity at Rhodes, this space also allows them to assimilate and ingest modern or foreign elements (Morley, 1994), creating hybrid identities which Kraidy (1999) speaks of (cited in Strelitz, 2004: 626). Rhodes University is an interesting social milieu where different social identities can be performed and negotiated. For example, some of the students pointed out that, although they drink alcohol at Rhodes and engage in other ‘liberal’ activities, they would not consume alcohol at home or engage in such liberal activities because of the contextual cultural constraints which prohibit them. Engaging in some of the liberal activities

highlight that identities are negotiated and this negotiation allows the students to reshape their identities and attempt to incorporate themselves into the wider student body.

However, for some of these students, these negotiations are never fully accomplished or complete. Song (2003) argues that the process of self-formation is complex and inconclusive. Rather than individuals adhering to a prescribed code of conduct or opting out “some individuals may attempt to fashion a personalised stance” (Song, 2003: 58). These “in-betweeners” are able to claim partial identification or conditional belonging demonstrating “how partial, fragmented, and multifaceted the experience of ‘belonging’ can be” (Song, 2003: 59). Individuals are thus able to reflexively act and choose lifestyles which fit in with the identities they want.

The students also engage in activities such as activism and volunteerism, which incorporate them into the wider student body. The students acknowledged that they want to be incorporated into the wider student body but the activities they engage in have to reflect and fit in with their identities. During the discussion it was interesting to note that those students who are not active in societies asserted their interest in taking part in the wider student life:

Zinathi: I would like to join the Xhosa society, RMR [Rhodes Music Radio] and I could even join Shark to graduate and become a peer educator to raise awareness on HIV/Aids and STI. I’m interested in those things.

This discussion brings into focus their desire to connect with a wider range of people and places that they share similar ideas and beliefs with. The students noted that if these societies have students with different values and beliefs from theirs, or if they did not accommodate their values and expectations, then they would not join them or they would not renew their membership.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the biographical background of some of the participants in order to illustrate the relative homogeneity of the group and how they experience Rhodes University. It is clear from the interviews that the students feel marginalised by a host of factors, which include being members of the Extended Studies Programme, being labelled as academically

inept owing to their relative poor command of English. Some of the students are at odds with dominant social practices, which are in conflict with their traditional, religious and cultural subjectivities. Using Thompson's (1995: 179-206) thesis on the re-mooring of tradition, I further argued that although Rhodes University is identified as an elite and modern institution, tradition and religion remains relevant to these students.

The students use their traditional, religious and cultural subjectivities to make sense of the social life they experience. They attempt to bring into this space the values that they feel are central to their identity. The students 're-moor' and 're-embed' their traditional and cultural beliefs within a modern institutional space and at the same time ingest and assimilate some of the modern or foreign elements thus creating hybrid identities (Morley, 1994 and Kraidy, 1999; cited in Strelitz, 2004: 626). With Giddens (1991) in mind, I argued that students do not passively perform their identities but actively and reflexively negotiate their social actions, falling back on their socio-cultural experiences to give meaning to their actions. The next chapter discusses and critiques the utopian position in relation to how students construct and perform their identities on Facebook.

Chapter 7: Discussion of Facebook usage related to offline identities

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses and critiques the utopian understanding of SNSs in relation to how students construct and perform their identities on Facebook. The dystopian position which gives primacy to offline social relations and identities in shaping online representations is used to critique the utopian position. The two theoretical positions are discussed in relation to how the students are using Facebook in order to test the validity of the claims offered by these two perspectives. In addition, the students' usage of Facebook is discussed in relation to online and offline identities and social relationships.

7.2 Offline and online linkage: Critique of the utopian position on Facebook usage

Utopian theorists have been the foremost proponents of the potential of the Internet and its interfaces to connect and encourage new online relationships. Theorists such as Rheingold (1993) have argued that interfaces such as social networks and the Internet at large “create opportunities for new personal relationships” (quoted in Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 4). These theorists further argue that, the Internet and its interfaces have the potential to “revolutionize society for the better...bringing together disparate people from around the world [and] allow relationships to flourish in an environment of equality and respect” (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3). The findings of this study resonate with dystopian claims argued by theorists such as boyd (2008) that the performances of online relationships are connected or related to the offline, and when online, users communicate almost exclusively with others they know offline.

Dystopian theorists further argue that, the use of SNSs, such as Facebook, encourages and allows the reinforcement of pre-existing social ties or “latent ties” (Haythornthwaite, 2005, quoted in boyd and Ellison, 2007:2). Latent ties imply weak offline relationships with the potential to be strengthened online. The research participants use Facebook primarily to communicate with their friends, families and relatives; the people they have offline relations with, converse to utopian claims that interfaces such as social networks create opportunities for new personal relationships:

Yanga: I use Facebook to stay in touch with friends I know personally and I even communicate with relatives.

Zinathi: When I first joined Facebook I just invited everyone I knew. Most of the people that are my friends on Facebook are the people I know from Founders Hall [these are primarily ex-DET students]. Most of the time I use Facebook to share pictures with friends and I also have friends at UJ [University of Johannesburg] and NMMU [Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University] they keep me posted about what's going on that side like posting pictures. I get a chance to see how they are socialising and holding up there. I also get a chance to communicate with relatives on Facebook.

The discussion above show that on Facebook, the students primarily interact with people they have offline relations. The students also engage in “searching” for and connecting with people whom they have an offline connection with more than they “browse” for complete strangers (Ellison *et al*, 2006), in line with the dystopian position which assert that online performances are related and connected to the offline world.

Family ties take on a different significance in the South African context. There are programmes across the media whose objective is to reunite lost families or mediate and solve family issues. These include the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC1) programmes, such as *Khumbul'ekhaya* [Remember home]. *Khumbul'ekhaya* is a “family docu-reality series that tracks the journeys of real South Africans who ask *Khumbul'ekhaya* for help in their search to heal their relationships with lost or estranged family members... through reconciliation and forgiveness” (www.tvsa.co.za). Similarly, tabloid newspaper pages, such as the missing people section in the *Daily Sun* focus on re-uniting lost family members. The concept of a lost family member found or reunited is an important theme within the wider working class psyche, and this is understandable given the centrality of family ties to the formation of identity in South Africa (Viljoen, 1994). (See also Amoateng, Richter, Makiwane, and Rama, (2004) on the structure of families in South Africa). A study exploring township families and youth identity in South Africa (Campbell, 1994), highlights the importance of family ties as a fundamental aspect of identity. The family in the townships provide youths with strong values which impact on their social behaviour and identity (Campbell, 1994: 84).

This connection with family members and relatives who would otherwise remain distant or unknown is a recurring theme:

Sibongiseni: I chat with people I haven't seen for many years, friends and family. That's where I found my aunt who is in Umtata now. I hadn't lived in the rural areas for so long. I hadn't seen her for about 5 years and then I got an invite from her on Facebook, I was so happy. There was also this guy on Facebook who asked me, "are you from Butterworth" and I said "yes" then he asked me, "who is your mother"? And I said "it's Khayakazi" and he said "oh my God that's my sister". Then the other day he bought me airtime [laughter and chuckles from everyone] because he wanted me to get him a girlfriend. I asked my mother and she said she knew him.

Philisiwe: Yaa I know with my uncle as well, he is in London. You also find people who you didn't know, like family and relatives.

Although some of the participants acknowledged that they accept 'friend requests' from strangers, the people they most actively communicate with are the people they know and have offline relations or offline connections with. Although utopian theorists argue that SNSs have the potential to connect strangers, this connection does not automatically lead to the formation of new online relationships and communication:

Khanyi: When I started, my friends on Facebook were the people that I knew were from my residence. But now I accept even random people but the people I communicate with are the people I know personally.

On Facebook, the students rarely communicate or engage with strangers or people who do not share the same physical locality with them as utopian theorists would claim. These findings are in line with boyd's (2008) assertion that users online communicate almost exclusively with others they know offline. Ellison *et al* (2006) similarly claim that Facebook users engage in "searching" for people and connect with others whom they have an offline connection with more than they "browse" for complete strangers.

This thesis also argues that identities on Facebook are strongly anchored offline by users' subject positions and social relations. Therefore, it can be said that on Facebook, identities

are relatively authentic. Authentic Facebook identities in this context mean online identities which attempt to represent or mirror offline identities or lived offline experiences. As argued in Chapter 3, online identities have been critiqued as lacking authenticity because while online, “bodies and their attributes (gender, ethnicity, age, beauty) are therefore not perceptible...one can claim to be whatever one wants” (Slater, 1998: 3). Furthermore, being disembodied while online means that “we can be interactively present to each other as unanchored textual bodies without being proximate or visible as definite physical objects” (Slater, 1998: 91). However, Facebook differs from early text based SNSs and computer mediated communications and has since advanced to include video, pictures and audio and other multimedia functionalities which help to anchor identities. Furthermore, the nature of Facebook, which requires people to join a bounded network and connect primarily with people they know or share offline relations with, underline the anchorage of online social identities. This claim critiques the utopian position which claims that online relations are free-floating. The claim supports the theoretical position which argues that how we perform our identities online is rooted in how we present ourselves offline.

7.3 Where offline meet the online: Dystopian understanding of Facebook usage

Critics of the utopian position give primacy to offline relationships in shaping the relationships developed and performed online. boyd (2008) asserts this point in the argument that online social relationships are related to the physical self, which is grounded in offline social relations, which in turn influence the performance of online activities. There is a “direct link between offline and online identities” (boyd, 2008: 129) and the online activities are performed with people primarily met offline. The findings of my study point to this strong connection between offline social relations and online performances. As discussed in the previous section, the research participants communicate primarily with people they know, their friends, family and relatives, people they share the same physical locality with or people they share the same offline experiences with. Thus, people at Rhodes University, family members and relatives are the ‘invisible audience’ boyd (2008) and Ginger (2008) speak of, for whom these online representations are signalled. This next section discusses how the research participants use Facebook in relation to their social experiences.

7. 3. 1 BSc Foundation: Usefulness, exclusivity and contestations

As discussed before, the ESP students feel socially constrained and marginalised at Rhodes University due to various institutional and social factors. Thus, it is not surprising that these students use Facebook to assert and affirm those aspects of their identity that are important to them. One of the ways in which these students assert their identity as members of a marginalised group is through their Facebook group, titled ‘BSc Foundation (Rhodes University)’. The group aims to appreciate the Extended Studies at Rhodes University and everyone from the Extended Studies is welcome to join and invite others (www.facebook.com). The group was created by Yanga Madikazi, a Bachelor of Sciences student in September 2008, while doing his first year on the Extended Studies Programme.

Yanga: We created the group to appreciate being on Extended Studies. We wanted something that could bring us together, even if we are not together at that time, or after our first year. We wanted something that could take us back to where we were that year. Like the pictures uploaded there, the discussions and everything. The group is very useful to us. We upload a lot of pictures from the different years. We also get to know people from different years. There are people in the group who were on Extended Studies in 2006, 2007 and 2008 and we are all in the same group now.

The group started off exclusively for students on the ESP studying Bachelor of Sciences. The group is predominantly made up of students from the Faculty of Science because as one group member, Zinathi, said:

It is easier for the group’s [creator and] administrators who are in the Faculty of Science to gain access to and communicate with their fellow science students.

However, the group is committed to integrate other ESP students and, according to Zinathi, “starting from next year we will try to incorporate them [Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Arts students on the Extended Studies]”. The group’s creator noted that the group has retained the name BSc-Foundation in an attempt to acknowledge where it started, but the issue about the title and its suggested exclusivity remains contentious and continues to be between members of this group. Some group members argue that the group should remain exclusive while others support inclusivity.

The group currently has 63 members and 23 discussion topics (www.facebook.com). The discussion forum has topics ranging from messages of encouragement and support during exams to social discussions such as “Which department has the most beautiful chicks on Extended Studies?” (www.facebook.com). The students also discuss and upload academic related content. For example one student posted a video of a geology field trip that their class had engaged in. Other members of the group also highlight the importance of the groups to new members:

Tshepo: The thing is, let’s say next year there will be newcomers in Foundation, so on the Foundation group we sort of try to make them feel welcome, to help them fit in. To show them how Rhodes is, but not doing it directly but indirectly, telling them showing them around and keeping them posted on what events we had before.

The Facebook group also helps the students by acting as a platform connecting new members to the older members, as noted below:

Zinathi: The group also helps us to know those students who were also on Extended Studies before you.... you get the chance to talk and chat to those people and you get to know the things that they have experienced and went through while they were doing the same things on Extended Studies.

Facebook offers a platform where these students can assert their group identity and demonstrate their particular difference as members of the ESP through their Facebook group. This relates to the theoretical position which asserts that online performances are related to offline social relations or experiences and that people communicate with others with whom they share similar offline experiences. Although one could argue as utopians do that people first meet on Facebook and that the offline relationships develop out of these online relationships, this is not primarily the case with the research subjects; they use Facebook to maintain, extend, and strengthen existing offline social relationships and to sustain pre-existing social ties.

The students also discuss more serious issues such as their experiences as ex-DET students on the Rhodes campus and the tensions around belonging to the broader social community. A recurring theme which emerges from some of the group members’ wall postings is their

advocacy for exclusivity. Although the group is defined as a family, some members argue against inviting other Extended Studies groups to join their group as noted below:

Mabona: The other faculties think that they are pretty smarter than us. They should come up with their own group lol [Laugh out loud]. (www.facebook.com)

Mabona is a student in the Faculty of Science. Nevertheless, the group creator and other group members argue against such exclusivity:

Ja that's right Mabona but there is no family without cousins, brothers and sisters...we need our cousins...BCom and BA guys...should be invited too...let's be family". (www.facebook.com)

Discrimination is not just between classes (as it is between these students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those more privileged than themselves) but reflects and helps to reproduce wider campus boundaries between faculties or departments. It is interesting to see the tussle that occurs as this exclusivity is contested and refuted, interestingly, in the name of family. The discussion above also highlights the importance of this group to its members as a social space to reconnect and share ideas and social experiences within set boundaries. The discussion also signals the offline feelings of being perceived as less capable intellectually by other students migrate online. This influences why some of the students feel this group should be exclude "them". "Them" in this case refers to the BCom and BA students also on extended studies. Why these students are seen as being more intellectually capable is an issue which is difficult to understand and it cannot be conclusively explained in this study. One could argue that being on the ESP should translate to relative homogeneity amongst all students on the ESP but this does not seem to be the case. However, identifying themselves as a family indicates that the group wants to be viewed as a fairly homogenous group which shares common experiences despite their different academic studies. Thus, the way the students use their Facebook group, despite contestation over membership, is indicative not only of their marginalisation, vis-à-vis the wider student body, but also of their desire to preserve a space within which they can communicate and share information on issues pertinent to their identities. For example, a group member who experienced death in his family received messages of condolences and comfort from fellow group members. The group members sent the messages on the group's wall, and below are some of the wall posts:

Siphosethu: Hey guys lets please support uMagcina because he's going through a rough time, I just met him and he told me that he's going home because 6 people from his family passed away in a car accident, so let's please support each other like a family. (www.facebook.com)

Kamogelo: Eish Siphosethu thanks for letting us know...guys this is major...lets support him...He needs us, especially during this rough time (Exams). (www.facebook.com).

Ezethu: Wow this is big news guys....I think we all need to just pray for him and hope that the LORD is looking after him. (www.facebook.com).

Students also post pictures, albums and videos of the events they organise and attend. These include campus soccer games, braais and other parties meant for members to get together and socialise as a group. Facebook becomes the space where they announce their events and post pictures or videos to affirm their identity before and after they hold such meetings. The excerpt below by the group's administrator indicates how the events bring the 'family' together:

This year's events have arrived. This is a get together or more like a reunion, so please guys show your support and how proud you are to be part of the family. There is going to be a soccer match (BScF1 vs. BScF2) first, it's just for fun so even if you don't really like soccer or have never played before, just come and have fun. After the game there is going to be a braai! (www.facebook.com).

I asked the participants to identify the other Facebook activities that they engage in. It emerged that the participants' activities included posting and commenting on pictures or photos, reading comments and links posted on the wall and status updates, communicating with family and friends and contributing to other Facebook groups. These online activities are essentially identity performances or identity management strategies that are related to offline social relations and day-to-day experiences. These students not only meet offline within the academic space, but also get involved in various extracurricular activities within the wider Grahamstown environment. Some of these offline activities are expressed online when they

do not conflict with the identity constructed for their close support group and family. A pertinent example is the way in which

7.3.2 The performance of religious practices and beliefs on Facebook

Religion is central to these students and this resonates with other studies that have found that “religion plays a central role in the lives of [South African] young people” (Van Zyl Slabbert *et al*, 1994: 85-86). Similarly, nationally representative studies such as “Growing up Tough” (Everatt, 1993) also “found church attendance by black youth amongst the highest in the world” (cited in, Swartz, 2009: 39). The students assert their different religious identity through their individual Facebook profiles or pages and status updates. These identities are not being signalled only to students on Extended Studies or from ex-DET backgrounds. The students communicate with other students from non-DET backgrounds who belong to their religious denominations as long as they share the same values and religious beliefs. For example, the students’ religious affiliation is expressed through sharing links, pages and contributing to Christian groups, as one student asserts:

Pumela: On Facebook, I communicate with people in my church [Seventh Day Adventist] especially this other guy. He likes and reads a lot of church books...he shares what he reads on Facebook. He will say; today I read this book, and that chapter, things like that.

One student, Ncebakazi has a profile picture of herself wearing her Methodist church uniform. This signalling of religious identity on Facebook is directly linked to an important aspect of this student’s offline identity. Facebook becomes a platform students use to further perform, reaffirm and signal these Christian identities to an audience of friends and family who already know and can affirm them. This profile picture is an important representation which explicitly signals group membership and belonging. As Thompson argues, religious affiliation “provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of identity as an integral part of a broader collectivity of individuals who share similar beliefs and who have, to some extent, a common history and a collective fate” (1995: 194). Religion forms a fairly important part of social and personal identity, especially for students from township backgrounds where specific church affiliation is not just a personal or individualistic choice but is often related to family and “community” belonging (Swartz, 2009). One of the major

motivations for individuals attending church services is to be part of a community. German notes that in order to be viewed as a good citizens, people join and attend a house of worship, it is this “deep desire to belong to the community [that] prompts service attendance” (2004: 58). Most of these students attend church services regularly and they use Facebook to signal and reaffirm their religious beliefs to others with whom they are in agreement.

Consistent church attendance is also understood as essential to preserving and strengthening religious values. As Thompson notes, the maintenance of tradition or religion “requires the continual re-enactment of its symbolic content... Practical repetition is the only way of securing temporal continuity” (1995: 195). Religion and church attendance thus remain fundamental aspects of both self and social identity for most of these students. In a study exploring township families and youth identity in South Africa, Campbell (1994) highlights the importance of church membership as providing emotional and moral support. Similarly, some of the students’ status updates highlight the role of religion in their lives:

Pumela: Guys I’m writing my first exam next Monday...But whatever happens I know that GOD will and is always with me. HE and I are gonna do this together! Team work is better than one nhe? (www.facebook.com).

7.4 The utopian benefits of Facebook usage at Rhodes University

The students also use Facebook to engage across social strata and to integrate themselves into the wider student body. This supports the utopian claim in principle. In practice, Facebook in general, and the Rhodes University group in particular becomes the *de facto* “Student Zone” which the students use to access information on various events such as inter-res or inter-house sporting events and other social events related to campus life. The students also access other campus related Facebook groups which help them to assert their marginalised student identity. Such groups include cultural societies such as the IsiXhosa Open Society which aims to:

Promote isiXhosa as a language and Xhosa culture at Rhodes University and in Grahamstown. We believe that even though Rhodes is at the heart of the Eastern Cape where the majority are speaking isiXhosa, there is very little visibility and promotion of isiXhosa. (www.facebook.com)

Other groups and activities include the Rhodes University Facebook group which is seamlessly linked to the official Rhodes University website and the Rhodes social life. On Facebook, students also engage in and belong to their hall or house of residence, which perhaps can foster a sense of 'hyper-local' belonging. Some of the residence related groups that the students belong to on Facebook include the Helen Joseph Women's Residence, Founders Hall and Rhodes University Oppidans, for students living in town. This online engagement is performed in relation to the students' offline connections. This is line with the theoretical position which asserts that on Facebook users primarily communicate with people with whom they share pre-existing offline relations and connections. As utopians would claim, the students are also using Facebook to integrate themselves into the wider student body and they manage to carve out a localised sense of identity.

7.5 The performance of cultural and traditional practices on Facebook

Facebook allows the students the space to express and represent their cultural and traditional identities in different ways. For example, the research participants assert their different cultural identities through various Facebook activities such as cultural groups, as noted below:

Singotibusiwe: There is a group I like, *MaVenda ditongise*, it talks about Venda culture, idioms in Venda. I find that interesting, you laugh at that and make comments and come up with your own idioms. You also ask other people, do you guys know this in Venda? You share idioms and metaphors. [Referring to the interviewer] You might be Shona but there are a lot of Shona words and cultural things you don't know. I also joined this group *Dza Hashu*, it means something from my homeland, something that I'm proud of. It's also about Venda culture.

The other participants also perform their different cultural identities through contributing to or belonging to cultural groups or pages associated with their traditional homes such as: *Gcuwa -Ekhaya* (Butterworth my home), I grew up in a village (rural area) and I'm proud of it, *Proudly Vandanian (venda la hashu)* among others.

The students also assert their traditional identities through some of Facebook's seemingly mundane applications. For example, when I asked if and how Facebook reflects on their identities, a student responded:

Khanyi: It has a lot of things that I like, like the fact that I joined the horoscope, I'm superstitious. It's more English but I'm still superstitious.

The student attributed her superstitious beliefs and their enactment through the Facebook horoscope to her traditional identity. The student also said her traditional identity includes her belief in traditional medicine, rituals and customs such as *umemulo* [girl child initiation after turning 21] and also acknowledging that witchcraft exists.

It is interesting to note that some of the students are critical of academic experiences which exist in opposition to their traditional or cultural identities. These students use Facebook to express their discontent with what they view as insensitive academic freedom at Rhodes University. For example, some of the students were critical of a Politics course which allegedly argued that male circumcision is "an act of violence". One student posted on her status update saying:

Sibongiseni: *Ndimosindo ndiyavutha* [I'm raging with anger], how is circumcision an act of collective violence? It's our culture and for those who really don't know their roots, those who do not have a culture it might be easy for them to discredit this cultural practice. (www.facebook.com)

This student criticised other Xhosa students who had failed to acknowledge the cultural sensitivity of this issue, adding that:

Sibongiseni: Shame *abantu yazi xabvelapa bacingafanba bamhlope*. [Shame on you people, you know they think they are white] Circumcision is a private thing between *amadoda* [men] not young girls, shame on u Xhosa girls, u don't really know who you are and that's a shame. (www.facebook.com)

This issue generated much interest from the student's friends on Facebook and there were 16 comments from friends, with some students criticising the lecturer for his insensitivity and trying to discredit their culture, as noted in the comments below:

Somdyala: Sana was this in a politics lecture? Anyway you must remember that people work so hard to discredit something they know nothing about and one of those things has long been the Xhosa ritual. (www.facebook.com)

Sibongiseni: @Banele, my politics lecture, *ewe wandi zezinto zicinga zifunde kakulu* [These people think they have studied too much and are highly educated] but have no culture... *Bona bati* [they say] its freedom of speech [when that happens] then it's not if someone will be offended... (www.facebook.com)

The students added that they will never stop practicing their “sacred tradition” and urged lecturers to be sensitive to their traditional cultures. The above discussion also indicates the reflexive nature of identity that Giddens (1991) discusses, and demonstrates the strong link between the offline social world and the online space. It also shows how Facebook provides a “safe” space to discuss topics and opinions that are marginalised on campus. Although this issue was raised in class, the approach the lecturer took did not sit well with the students. The students argued that they are sometimes not comfortable with expressing their concerns within the academic environment but would rather express their views on Facebook. In effect, the opinions that they are not able to voice in the offline world are displaced to this virtual forum.

The students exhibited strong cultural roots through their usage of their indigenous language on Facebook as exemplified by the discussion above. In social interactions, people use language, body movements and even clothes to signal and reveal information about themselves to others (boyd, 2008: 128). On Facebook, “profiles can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being... [to] express and represent salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret” (boyd, 2008: 129). Similarly, in developing and expressing their identities, people rely on language and “culturally available resources in their immediate social networks and in society as a whole” (Frosh, 1999: 413). As Ginger argues, “language and culture become ways of creating distance or barriers between “locations” on Facebook” (2008: 39). In line with both boyd and Ginger’s assertions, this study found that students use their various indigenous languages such as isiXhosa, Venda or Zulu to signal and assert their cultural identities to others. For example, as noted in the above male circumcision discussion, the students asserted their strong support of the cultural rite through the use of isiXhosa. The students used their language, cultural and moral capital to create distance between themselves and those who do not seem to understand their culture.

This discussion is particularly salient in the light of the alienation many black students feel when confronted with the English language and modern environment at Rhodes University. It relates also to the class dimension of (not) belonging, as mentioned by Strelitz (2005) in the “Homeland” study and to signal distance from those black students whose class status and fluency in English is seen as a betrayal of their “authentic” traditional or religious origins. Ginger notes that, “the ways social identity is shaped on Facebook, in other words, could be similar to those in the face-to-face world” (2008: 40). Cultural practices are incorporated in students’ social life and these identities are articulated through Facebook representations. Culture and religion are the normative codes upon which online representations are based, influencing how users construct and conduct themselves on Facebook in relation to their socio-cultural norms.

7.6 The purposeful expression and suppression of self on Facebook

As discussed earlier in this chapter, youth as an identity has to be understood as contingent on the meanings that are associated with ‘being young’ in a particular socio-cultural context. Such an approach to understanding what it means to be young in a specific social space takes into consideration the various socio-cultural constraints which help to shape and determine social behaviour and social relations. A Foucauldian perspective suggests that the performance of identity is not simply a matter of individual choice: rather, it is the result of choices made as subjects of particular discourses which act as powerful and subtle forms of “governmentality” that are characteristic of modern societies (quoted in Buckingham, 2008: 10). Thompson also argues that lived experiences continue to influence the project of self-formation as “we think of ourselves and our life trajectories primarily in relation to others whom, and the events which, we encounter...in the practical contexts of our daily lives” (1995: 233). On Facebook, identity performances are similarly policed or self regulated⁴ in line with what is socially acceptable within the environment people inhabit. For example, Rhodes is identified as a modern and liberal social space and students with strong traditional or conservative roots are often critical of social practices which go against their conservative identities. In order to make this point, the students noted that, on Facebook, they signal their

⁴ Foucault’s ideas on the processes of self “surveillance” (1977) and “disciplinary” (1979) relate to how individuals act in line with social norms.

particular socio-cultural identities not just by what they include on their pages but also by not belonging to online groups which conflict with the individuals' socio-cultural beliefs:

Singotibusiwe: I cannot join a group for gays on Facebook. It goes with the ones I can't join at Rhodes. You know, Facebook it reflects reality because if I can't join the one at Rhodes [OutRhodes] then even on Facebook I don't see any reason why I should join because I don't believe in that.

Some of these students' behaviour correlates with what is expected of them as culturally or religiously committed young people. The students have an image of what is socially and morally acceptable as young people influenced by traditional subjectivities. In this case, traditional values function as moral influences which provide a moral code of behaviour (Swartz, 2009: 120). Similarly, as Roberts and Reddy argue, in South Africa "more disapproving attitudes to homosexuals and their behaviour are likely to be found among the strongly religious and those belonging to a 'conservative' denomination" (2008).

There are other wider groups the students identified as existing in opposition to their identities. For example, one of the group which highlights the offline pervasive drinking culture at Rhodes identified by Goga is the Facebook group 'I am a Rhodent therefore I can out-drink you'. The group's description reads:

For those who are/were, can and know it. We are actively against RU's [Rhodes University] policy which is attempting to stop Rhodes drinking culture... (www.facebook.com)

The students argued that they would not join such a group:

Zinathi: I wouldn't join a group like the group "I am a Rhodent therefore I can out-drink you". Such a group would portray a different image of me. If a person goes to my profile they will see that I'm a member of such a group. All of a sudden the person who doesn't know much about me will get the impression that I like the whole drinking and getting drunk business at Rhodes.

It is because of the "direct link between offline and online, [that people] are inclined to present the side of themselves that they believe will be well received by these peers" (boyd,

2008: 129) (see also Weber and Mitchell, 2008: 44). On Facebook, the students are inclined to represent themselves in ways which are socially acceptable insofar as their identities are concerned. Thus, for some of these students, their social behaviour correlates with what is expected of them as religiously or culturally committed young people. Their moral stances are actively included in their social experiences and these identities are articulated or signalled on Facebook. There are people whom one cannot be 'friends' with on Facebook because of socio-cultural beliefs which forbid such an association:

Khanyi: [On Facebook I cannot be friends with] my mom my dad and [former] teachers from high school, my tutors here at Rhodes and my lecturers. My relationships and practices in a way influence what I would do and who I relate to on Facebook...that I have certain respect for my elders. It's things that I personally believe in and I have articulated them through Facebook.

Most of the research participants are originally from townships, and Swartz notes that as moral environments, "township communities are not places where moral decisions are autonomous, personal, or private. Neighbours know each other, communicate regarding young people's behaviour, and are a source of public sanction and communal help" (Swartz, 2009: 44). Thus, young people's moral behaviour normally reflects or correlates with what is expected of them as religiously or culturally committed young people. For example, as some of the participants noted, the act of posting pictures is a carefully constructed and thought through process. The representations are not randomly posted online but are selected to mirror the identity the user wants to portray to a particular audience.

On Facebook, the students police or self regulate their representations in line with what is socially acceptable within the environment people inhabit. As one student noted:

Yanga: I don't really like posting or seeing pictures when I'm drunk because my brothers and sisters will see them on Facebook and also when I'm with a chick [girl] of course. They wouldn't say anything but it would be like drinking and going to them when I'm drunk. I wouldn't do that, I respect them; it's just showing some respect.

Similarly, another student argued that she censors what she can represent on Facebook in line with what is permissible and expected of her as a young woman. She says:

Khanyi: I don't put any pictures of me holding any form of alcohol because I have friends on Facebook from my old school who some are younger [laughs and chuckles] I don't think they should see that and also because some will go tell my mother and my dad and I don't want that. I have got my sister's peers who are on Facebook so that's a problem and soon my brother's peers are going to be on Facebook and if I put my business on Facebook they are going to find out which is a problem for me. As the eldest child it's not setting a good example showing them that I'm drinking alcohol or it's okay to drink alcohol or it's okay to wear short skirts.

In this case, youth is associated with engaging in responsible and respectful social activities and getting drunk or wearing short skirts are socially unacceptable practices. Although it seems as if some of these students are engaging in culturally unacceptable activities which they do not want their parents or siblings to know, this does not negate the significance of these beliefs to them. The Rhodes University social space offers a modern and liberal environment which allows students to negotiate the tensions arising from striking a balance between their traditional values and fitting into this liberal space. Although they may retain their moral and cultural beliefs, their interaction with modern and liberal elements tends to supersede their traditional subjectivities. This resonates with Swartz's (2009) study which found significant inconsistencies between moral beliefs and moral behaviour. For example, a young woman asserted her autonomy on the issue of having a boyfriend, which her church taught was wrong and she planned on hiding it (Swartz, 2009: 93). The act of censoring unacceptable socio-cultural practices and representations on Facebook is not new. It relates to how people can hide offline identities which do not fit in with what is expected of them. This reflects the post-structural position which states that identities are performed within an environment of contesting fields where one's identity emerges in relation to others (Hall, 1992). The notion of identity as a 'performance' refers to "social identities that are 'performed' with a particular audience in mind, or, literally, in view... Identity performance mean[s] the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviours relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity" (Klein, Spears and Reicher, 2007: 3). Thus, the representations on Facebook are constructed to reflect the offline identities that are most socially acceptable; in this case to signal what it means to be a respectable or decent young person for an imagined audience. Online identities and performances are never free

floating as utopians would claim, they reflect the deeper social issues and practices inherent in the offline world.

7.7 Audience management strategies

The students manage their audience when they choose to post “modern”, unconventional or representations which might be viewed as transgressive. There are activities that are not supposed to be viewed by a certain audience and to counter self censorship; the students employ strategies such as activating privacy settings on their profiles or deleting certain contacts. For example, one student posted a picture of herself in a bikini but when I asked her if there was anyone she would not be comfortable with seeing such a representation, she responded:

Khanyi: My father only because he is traditional, both my parents actually. It’s because my father traditionally is not meant to see me like that so that’s why I wouldn’t want them to see that picture.

This student’s father is not on Facebook and even if the father was a Facebook member, she says they would not be Facebook “friends”. According to Khanyi, within the traditional Zulu culture, young people do not normally mix with the elderly and they are not expected to be comfortable around the elderly but they should maintain some form of respectful distance. Respect for the elders is ensured by creating and maintaining a distance between youths and their elders. These offline beliefs and practices permeate Facebook and the students customise their privacy settings online to ensure the maintenance of such distance.

It can also be argued that the traditional and religious identities of these students are assimilated with modern elements at Rhodes (Morley, 1994). Rather than coming in conflict, hybrid identities are born out of the negotiation between traditional values and elements of modernity at Rhodes (Kraidy, 1999 cited in Strelitz, 2004: 626). Although some of these students inhabit or subscribe to traditional subjectivities, Rhodes allows them an opportunity to assimilate and ingest modern or foreign elements. This modern space allows them to construct and perform other identities which might challenge their traditional identities. This relates back to the focus of the study which explores how identities and social experiences are lived at Rhodes University and how they are expressed through Facebook. These often

contradictory identities are signalled and represented online. Facebook provides a space for the negotiation and performance of different identities depending on the social space the user inhabits. The campus social space allows for the more liberal and modern identity and advocates for individualism. Students engage in different liberal activities at Rhodes which are represented online. For example, students who want to represent and signal their identities on Facebook without self censoring their activities use different strategies to counter self regulation. The exchanges below show how students negotiate their decisions on choosing an ideal Facebook audience:

Sibongiseni: You know on Facebook you can get invited by your family members and they know that you don't drink and then they see you holding a beer there...

Philisiwe: Ja, that's why I deleted my uncle. He doesn't know me as this outgoing, party animal sort of girl so when he sees pictures of me there holding ama Hunters and Savannas [alcoholic ciders] [chuckles from others], so I had to delete him because he is this staunch Christian person. He invited me but I had to delete him...bye uncle.

Pumela: Why?

Philisiwe: Because I want to put my pictures on Facebook, so I had to and there are other things other than pictures like the status, the things you say on your status update you don't want them to see. So in some ways it is because what I do on Facebook is what I do on campus...There are things which I would want other people to know about and others not to know about.

The discussion above relates to the dystopian position in that the students' Facebook 'performances' are influenced by their offline experiences. The students perform their identities with a particular audience in mind and their representations on Facebook are constructed to reflect their offline identities for a particular audience. Rather than censoring their Facebook content, these students choose to censor their audience.

Similarly, other students noted that they delete "friends" from home who they do not want to see their activities at Rhodes as noted below:

Khanyi: [chuckling] I deleted someone from back home who was too close to my parents. He was my brother's friend and my parents knew him. I deleted him because

people post pictures of me on Facebook and people make comments on my profile that I felt would be inappropriate for him to know.

Some of the activities the students perform at Rhodes and represent on Facebook include publicly announcing their relationship status and such explicit proclamations are culturally unacceptable. The students argue that while they publicly signal their relationship status on Facebook, there are people who are not supposed to see some of their performances online; hence they purposefully customise their audience. When I asked the students who they would not add as “friends” on Facebook, the general answer given were parents, as noted below:

Zinathi: Obviously my parents because some things they are not supposed to see, some hidden stuff like if they were to go to my profile and see my status that I’m in a relationship with so and so. They don’t know that I’m dating. That’s one of the things that I wouldn’t like them to see. That’s how I was raised, at this particular age; I am not supposed to be doing such things [having a girlfriend]. It will make them feel ashamed that our son is doing such things.

It emerged from the interviews and profiles of the students that the people the students are mainly performing for are other ESP or ex-DET students and other students with whom they share similar socio-cultural identities and social experiences. However, the students also address the wider Rhodes University community and their Facebook representations reflect their willingness to participate in campus activities such as sports events, student societies and other campus social activities. In principle, this supports the utopian position’s claim that Facebook has the potential to connect and encourage the formation of new online relationships. However, in practice, although Facebook allows these students the potential to participate in campus related online activities and also permits them to forge new online relations, their online performances and relations are primarily related to their offline relations and experiences.

The students also negotiate their hybrid identities in line with the social space they inhabit. There are different understandings and expectations of how young people ought to behave. Thus, there are social practices the students are free to express at Rhodes and subsequently perform on Facebook. However, when students go home, that social space has its own

normative expectations and limitations which govern social behaviour. As such, at Rhodes the students engage in different social practices and represent them online accordingly. The students employ different strategies on Facebook to negotiate the performance of their identities. The strategies include setting up privacy settings to determine who can view certain pictures, photo albums or post comments, deleting friends for various reasons or rejecting friend requests. These strategies are in line with Ginger's assertion that on Facebook:

Users develop an accurate vision of their identity online, visualizing it and custom tailoring their profile to their heart's content. Users ...regulate their privacy settings and manage their profiles to ensure they create exactly the audience they would like to have. (2008: 36)

This relates to the thesis focus in that it shows how the offline social practices are expressed online. It also reflects on how the offline lived experiences influence what can be represented and how it can be represented online. Thus, Facebook plays a crucial role in how young people construct their identities and socialise by acting as a platform where the offline identities and other social practices are represented, performed and signalled. As such, the use of Facebook has a strong association with the social practices inherent in the offline social world.

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed and critiqued the utopian perspective in relation to how students construct and perform their identities on Facebook, arguing that students primarily communicate and perform their identities with people they know or are acquainted to in the offline world. It then discussed the dystopian position which gives primacy to offline relations and identity in shaping online representations in light of the findings of how students use Facebook.

The overall trend found amongst the profiles and the interviews conducted is that Facebook users primarily communicate with people they have an offline relationship with. This study found that offline relationships precede the online relationships. Although one could argue as utopians do that people meet first on Facebook and that offline relationships develop out of

these online relationships, this is not primarily the case with the research subjects; they use Facebook to maintain or solidify existing offline social relationships or to sustain pre-existing social ties. This research drew parallels with Ginger's study which found that, "people's values and ideas of what can and should be shared seem to translate pretty well from one to the other [online and offline]" (2008: 76).

In addition, this study also found that despite the self being disembodied online, Facebook lends itself to the performance of authentic social identities which are anchored offline and embedded in lived social experiences, for example their religious, traditional values and beliefs which remain relevant to the meaning they make of their lives. Facebook provides a means by which the students are able to 're-moor' and 're-embed' their traditional, cultural and religious beliefs within a modern institutional space, and these beliefs give meaning to their actions. However, Rhodes also allows them to negotiate, assimilate and ingest modern or foreign elements (Morley, 1994), thus, creating hybrid identities (Kraidy, 1999 cited in Strelitz, 2004: 626). These identities are also signalled and performed on Facebook. Rather than censoring their Facebook content, some of these students choose to censor their audience and they continue to signal and perform their identities online uninhibitedly. One of the major findings of the study is that Facebook resembles the offline life and as Ginger's study found out, "the level of personal identity information people share on Facebook is pretty similar to what they do in the face to face world" (2008: 78). This is in line with the theoretical underpinnings which assert that Facebook use primarily shows a strong association with maintaining or solidifying existing offline relationships.

Chapter 8: Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I set out to examine the way students from disadvantaged backgrounds on the Rhodes University campus use Facebook to perform their identities. The study discussed utopian and dystopian positions and interrogated these theoretical perspectives in relation to the students' Facebook usage. It further explored how social identities are expressed and negotiated through Facebook in relation to offline social relations. The primary objective of the research was to explore this form of social networking in relation to online and offline identities and relationships.

The theoretical approaches adopted in this thesis are at the heart of debates about how the Internet and its interfaces, such as SNSs, affect the formation, growth and maintenance of new online social relationships or sustain existing offline relationships. Evident in this debate are two broadly opposed paradigms: the utopian and dystopian positions. These theoretical insights inform this study.

8.2 Conclusions

Utopians extol the potential of the Internet and its interfaces to connect and encourage the formation of new online relationships. Theorists such as Rheingold (1993) argue that interfaces such as social networks and the Internet at large "create opportunities for new personal relationships" (cited in Howcroft and Fitzgerald, 1998: 4). While the Internet and SNSs, such as Facebook, have the potential to connect strangers leading to the formation of new relationships, this study found out that this is not primarily the case. It emerged that the participants primarily communicated with people they knew personally offline, such as their friends, families and relatives. Although one could argue, as utopians claim, that people first meet on Facebook and that the offline relationships develop out of these online relationships, this is not primarily the case with the research subjects. On Facebook, the students rarely communicate or engage with strangers or people who do not share the same physical locality with them as utopian theorists claim. These findings are in line with boyd's assertion that the performances of online relationships are related to the offline, and users online communicate almost exclusively with others they know offline (2008: 3). As this thesis has shown, other

studies found out that Facebook users engage in “searching” for and connecting with people whom they have an offline connection with more than they “browse” for complete strangers and perform their social identities (Ellison *et al*, 2006).

The study also found that the use of SNSs, such as Facebook, encourages and allows the reinforcement of dormant pre-existing social ties or “latent ties” (Haythornthwaite, 2005, cited in boyd and Ellison, 2007:2). These latent ties imply weak offline relationships with the potential to be strengthened online, such as consolidating pre-existing friendship or family ties.

One of the major findings to emerge from the study is that students feel constrained and marginalised at Rhodes University through some of its social practices owing to various institutional and social reasons. Consequently, the students use Facebook to assert and perform their marginal identities. The students assert their group identity as members of a marginalised group through their Facebook group titled ‘BScFoundation (Rhodes University)’. It also emerged that Facebook does not merely perpetuate the offline marginalisation. Facebook offers a platform where different users can carve out their own space to assert the ways in which their identities differ from the mainstream campus, and to demonstrate their particular difference.

This thesis concluded that Facebook allows users to perform and assert their identities through its various functionalities. The Facebook activities that students mostly engage in include posting and commenting on pictures or photos, reading comments and links posted on the wall and status updates, communicating with family and friends and contributing to Facebook groups or pages. These activities are identity performances that are related to offline social relations and experiences. The findings of this study point to this strong connection between offline social relations and online performances. The results also resonate with Baym’s assertion that: when online “people are corresponding with people they know offline [thereby] building online selves that are richly contextualised in their offline social networks” (2002: 68).

It also emerged that the research participants perform their Facebook identities in relation to socio-cultural beliefs. Thus, their behaviour, representations and online identity performances by and large reflect offline socio-cultural identities. The students engage in self censorship and construct online performances in line with their offline identities. For example, identity is signalled by not belonging to online groups in conflict with the individuals' socio-cultural beliefs. The students also censor what they represent on Facebook in line with what is permissible and expected of them depending on their socio-cultural subjectivities.

A major finding of this thesis is that identities on Facebook are “authentic” despite the disembodiment of the self online. These online identities are strongly anchored offline by the users' subjective positions and lived social relations. This is in contrast to those critics who argue against the authenticity of online identities because online, “bodies and their attributes (gender, ethnicity, age, beauty) are therefore not perceptible...one can claim to be whatever one wants” (Slater, 1998: 3). Slater further argues that online “we can be interactively present to each other as unanchored textual bodies without being proximate or visible as definite physical objects” (1998: 91). However, this thesis has shown that Facebook significantly differs from early text based SNSs and computer mediated communications and has since advanced to include video and audio functionalities which help to anchor or situate offline identities. Furthermore, Facebook requires users to join a bounded network and connect primarily with people they know or share offline relations with (<http://www.facebook.com>) which underline the anchorage of online social identities. The research participants also asserted that their Facebook activities accurately reflect their offline lived social experiences and social identities.

It also emerged that the site plays a utopian role of enabling marginalised students access to wider social networks and also allows the students to assume and perform a range of other identities that are permissible at Rhodes. However, as critics of the utopian position argue, the online performances remain related to the offline world. Online identities are not always performed “in an environment of equality and respect” (Boase and Wellman, 2004: 3) as the utopians claim, and online performances reflect the deeper social issues inherent in the offline world.

As post-structural theorists argue, identities are negotiated within an environment of contesting fields where one's identity emerges in relation to others (Hall, 1992). Furthermore, the self is reflexive in nature (boyd, 2002: 21) and the self relies on society as a basis for such reflexivity, and without society the process of self evaluation would not be possible (Giddens 1991: 52-53). For most of these students, being at a modern and liberal institution allows them to assume and perform different identities that are permissible at Rhodes in addition to the identities with which they come to Rhodes. The students reflexively employ different strategies on Facebook to negotiate in the execution of their online identities. The strategies include setting up privacy settings to determine who can view certain pictures, photo albums or post comments, deleting friends for various reasons or rejecting friend requests. Consequently, Facebook becomes a platform which gives students the power to negotiate their different identities and perform them in line with their subjective understandings.

8.3 Limitations and critiques

It has become commonplace to argue that social networks have changed how people communicate, perform identities and socialize, but this process is not without its limitations. Scholars such as Ginger have argued that “the restrictive nature of the technologies involved cannot convey all of the nuances of face to face communication” (van de Scheur, 2010: <http://networkconference.netstudies.org/>). Inasmuch as proponents of SNSs argue that the online interfaces reflect the offline world, critics such as van de Scheur, (2010) argue that:

the mediums that we interact through are not flexible enough to socialize with all aspects of an online community and this creates distance between ourselves and most of our social networks. This negatively influences how we present our identity and connect with online communities. (<http://networkconference.netstudies.org/>)

Therefore, whatever the level of sophistication of the interface, there still exist technological discrepancies which influence the representation of all salient aspects of social identities. In addition critiques also note that identities are limited, in terms of how they are constructed and performed, by the technology and the social context of usage.

Other arguments levelled against the performance of identities on Facebook assert that people do not bare aspects self on SNSs but consciously frame, edit and reconstruct aspects of the

self. Furthermore, critics also argue that the post-structural or post-modern perspectives that any representation is “authentic” are questionable. Even if people were to bare all, this in itself is a particular representation for a specific audience. These critiques are valid but we also have to acknowledge that even offline social representations are framed and managed in line with particular social norms and expectations of an audience (Ginger, 2008).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide: qualitative interview questions

Questions for the focus group interviews

Background information

1. Please state your name clearly.
2. Introduce yourself; please tell me bit about your background,
3. Where are you from? What degree are you studying for and what is your year of study?
4. What does your mom and dad/ parents do?
5. What was it like growing up?
6. Please tell me a bit about your school background.

Questions on campus life

7. Why did you choose to come to Rhodes University?
8. What has it being like coming to Rhodes University?
9. What do you like about campus life? Tell me what you do not like about campus life?
10. Tell me about your experiences of living in University Residence/ or in off campus residence or digs?
11. What do you enjoy about living in University Residence/ or in off campus residence or digs? What has been difficult about it/if any?
12. Please tell me about your beliefs/ religious views. Do you go to church? If yes, please tell me about you church
13. Tell me about the student societies you belong to? Why did you choose them?
14. Which societies would you not join? Why would you not join them?
15. Tell me about the sporting activities you engage in? Why did you choose them?
16. Which sporting clubs would you not join? Why would you not join them?
17. Tell me about your friends, who do you hang out with on campus?
18. Which clubs, pubs or bars do you go to in Grahamstown?
19. How does it feel to be part of the Extended Studies group? (If on ESP)
20. Who do you hang out with mostly? Do you also hang out with a lot of ESP students?
(If on the ESP)

21. How do you/did you cope with work and social life?
22. What has changed for you since first year, socially and academically?
23. What is it like for you going home? Is it different after being at Rhodes for 1, 2 or 3 years?
24. How do you fit in at Rhodes and at home?

Please feel free to add anything you wish to say about your experiences at Rhodes University.

Questions about Facebook usage

25. Tell me about you and Facebook – how did you get to know about it?
26. How did you feel when you set up your Facebook profile?
27. Tell me about your experiences of using Facebook, what do you enjoy about using Facebook?
28. Please explain if there anything you do not like about Facebook?
29. Tell me about your friends. Who are you friends with and why?
30. Are your Facebook friends mostly from Rhodes or from home, please explain?
31. How often do you use Facebook and what do you use it mainly for?
32. Who would you like to see your profile, please explain?
33. Who would you not want to see your Facebook profile, please explain?
34. What are your favourite activities on Facebook?
35. Are any of your family members on Facebook? If not do you know why? If yes, explain how you feel about your interaction with them.
36. What would you not put up on your Facebook profile? Please explain.
37. What do you like seeing on your profile? What would you not want to see on your profile?
38. What information about you would you not like to share on Facebook? Please explain?
39. What do you like seeing on your friends' profiles? What do you not enjoy seeing on friends' profiles?
40. Please tell me about the photos that you have posted? (Some of the questions such as the one on photos were asked after going I had gone through the students' profiles, their answers clarified the choices they had made in deciding what to upload or not on Facebook).

41. Have you ever removed anyone from your friends contact list? Please explain your answer?
42. Do you have friends you have added/invited or who have added/invited you as “friends” after seeing your/their Facebook profile?
43. Have you ever declined a friend request? If yes why?
44. In what ways has Facebook become part of your everyday life?
45. How would you feel if Facebook was shut down?

Please feel free to add anything regarding about your experiences at Rhodes and experiences of using Facebook.

Thank you for your participation.

Note: Some questions were formulated during the interviews as follow up questions. These questions pertain to the students’ lived experiences and Facebook usage and profiles.

Questions for individual interviews

1. Please state your name clearly.
2. Introduce yourself; tell us a bit about your background,
3. Where are you from? What degree are you studying for and year of study.
4. What does your mom and dad/ parents do?
5. What was it like growing up?
6. Tell me about your school background.

Questions on the campus life

7. Why did you choose to come to Rhodes University?
8. What has it being like coming to Rhodes University?
9. What do you like about campus life and what you do not like about campus life?
10. Tell me about your experiences of living in the University residence/ or in off campus residence or digs?
11. What do you enjoy about living on campus/off campus residence?
12. What has been difficult about it?

13. Please tell me about your beliefs/religious views. Do you go to church? If yes, please tell me about you church.
14. Which other societies do you belong to? Why did you choose them?
15. Tell me about the student societies do you belong to? Why did you choose them?
16. Which sporting activities do you do? Why did you choose them?
17. Which sporting clubs wouldn't you join? Why would you not join them?
18. Who do you hang out with mostly, please explain?
19. Which clubs, pubs or bars do you go to in Grahamstown? If no, what do you do instead?
20. How does it feel to be part of the Extended Studies group? (If on ESP)
21. Do you hang out with a lot of ESP students? (If on ESP)
22. How do you cope with work and social life?
23. What has changed for you since first year, socially and academically?
24. What is it like for you going home? Is it different after here for 1, 2 or 3 years?
25. How do you feel about home?
26. How do you fit in at Rhodes?

Please feel free to add anything you wish to say about your experiences at Rhodes University.

Questions about Facebook usage

27. Tell me about you and Facebook – how did you get to know about it?
28. How did you feel when you set up your Facebook profile?
29. Tell me about your experiences of using Facebook, what do you enjoy about using Facebook?
30. What do you like seeing on your profile?
31. What information about you would you not like to share on Facebook? Please explain?
32. What do you like seeing on your friends' profiles? What do you not enjoy seeing on their profile?
33. Please tell me about the photos that you have posted? (Some of the questions such as the one on photos were asked after going I had gone through the students' profiles,

their answers clarified the choices they had made in deciding what to upload or not on Facebook).

34. Have you ever removed anyone from your friends contact list? Why?
35. Do you use Facebook when you are at home? If no, please explain why not? If yes, how often?
36. Who do you feel obliged to add as friends?
37. Do you have friends you have added/invited or who have added/invited you as “friends” after seeing your/their Facebook profile?
38. If yes, why did you choose to add them or why do you think they added you?
39. In what ways has Facebook become part of your everyday life?
40. How would you feel if Facebook was shut down?

Please feel free to add anything regarding about your experiences at Rhodes and experiences of using Facebook.

Thank you for your participation.

Note: Some questions were formulated during the interviews as follow up questions. These questions pertain to the students’ lived experiences and Facebook usage and profiles.

Appendix 2: Facebook representations and screenshots

Taken through the author’s account, these cannot be publicly published online due to privacy settings.

Screenshots from the participants’ account cannot be viewed if the user has customised privacy settings.

Any information from the groups can be accessed if the group settings are open to the public.