New frontiers in communication: A qualitative study of the use of social networking site Facebook

Frederik Kruger
Department of Psychology
Stellenbosch University
South Africa

Desmond Painter
Department of Psychology
Stellenbosch University
South Africa
dpainter@sun.ac.za

ABSTRACT
The main aim of this study was to explore the reasons why individuals use the social networking site Facebook. A grounded theory approach to qualitative research was used for this purpose. The sample included five female and three male participants, between the ages of 22 and 31. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes and included a wide variety of questions in order to understand participants’ use of, and experiences with, Facebook. Analysis of the reasons for use yielded two main themes: Information exchange and socialising. As subsidiary aims, the study also investigated how participants managed privacy and informational disclosure on their Facebook profiles, how they articulated the differences and similarities between social networking and face-to-face interactions, and the emergent social networking norms they identified.

Keywords: computer mediated communication; disclosure; Facebook; face-to-face interaction; social networking; social psychology of communication

We live in an age where modern technology is constantly and rapidly evolving. A key component of modern technology is computers and the internet. Whereas the internet was originally a virtual space for information sharing, it has evolved to a vehicle that facilitates an online social environment that exists parallel to and in productive relationship with face-to-face interaction and other dimensions of social
life. The impact of computer mediated communication (CMC) on the nature and norms of social interaction cannot be underestimated.

The social networking site Facebook, on which we focus in this article, is used extensively today by millions of people worldwide. South Africa is no exception, where it is used by people of all ages. Since social networking is reshaping social life, we need to understand not only the reasons people have for using these applications, but the way social networking sites operate as autonomous, productive social spaces – spaces characterised by emergent norms, rules, and strategies of self-presentation and disclosure.

Research on social networking and the use of Facebook in particular in the South African context is almost non-existent. In addition to the limited amount of South African literature, very little research, which uses a qualitative research approach, has been conducted internationally on social networking. This study addresses both these gaps in the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Web 2.0 and Facebook

The so-called second generation World Wide Web applications are collectively known as Web 2.0. It includes social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace), global mapping systems (e.g., Google Maps), video hosting sites (e.g., YouTube) and online encyclopaedias (e.g., Wikipedia). An important characteristic of Web 2.0 applications is that they are interactive: Users are empowered, through self-expression and sharing, to create and shape the content they encounter or with which they represent themselves online. These applications thus arguably promote collaboration, group interaction and the feeling of togetherness in online communities (Bastida, McGrath, & Maude, 2010). Web 2.0 applications also encompass devices, other than computers, that are internet enabled (e.g., smartphones and personal digital assistants).

Some researchers as well as public commentators have focused on the potential dangers of these modern applications; on what might make them detrimental to individuals and to social interaction – for example, the prevalence of, and easy access to, pornography as well as children being targeted online by individuals who mean them harm. Such dangers are real, but one should not neglect in the process the real and productive dimensions of sociality and community enabled by the internet and the creative ways people engage with it. Moreover, given their exposure to increasingly complex technological inventions, today’s adolescents and young adults are seen as a technologically smart generation, with a technological understanding often far exceeding that of older generations (Selwyn, 2010).
In this article, we focus on the relatively recent phenomenon of social networking. Social networking sites were created as media for individuals to interact and communicate with one another (Timm & Duven, 2008). The social networking site Facebook, for example, facilitates a large number of mediated social activities. Users can join online communities called ‘groups’, upload photos, describe interests, disclose personal information (contact information, relationship status, educational history, etc.) and install ad-hoc entertainment applications developed specifically for Facebook (Top-friends, Superwall, Farmville, etc.). Users interact with one another through Facebook e-mail, chat or posts on a friend’s wall (which forms part of the main interface on a person’s Facebook profile) (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). A live news feed informs users of the activities of their Facebook friends (updating statuses, commenting on photos, adding new friends, etc.). Users are able to invite people to their group of friends, giving these individuals access to private information (depending on preselected privacy settings) not necessarily accessible to individuals outside this group of friends.

Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes, currently has more than 500 million users worldwide. About three-quarters of people online in the USA use social networking sites (Awsumb, 2010) and 60% of 13 to 17 year olds have a social networking profile (Bastida et al., 2010). In March 2010, Facebook became the most visited site in the USA, topping the search engine Google (News Limited Australia, 2010). Users of social networking applications are also increasingly willing to spend money on fantasy goods (e.g., a cow in the game Farmville). The company ThinkEquity believed that virtual sales would top more than $1bn in 2010 (Levy & Galante, 2010). These statistics emphasise the emergent importance of Facebook as a multifaceted interactive space in the contemporary world.

Reasons for use

There are many reasons why people use sites like Facebook. These include social, psychological, pragmatic, legal as well as commercial reasons. For soldiers stationed overseas, for example, Facebook represents an easy and effective way to keep in touch with family and friends at home (Shackle, 2010). Furthermore, there is a growing interdependence between online and offline activities and communities (Selwyn, 2010). Facebook makes it possible to bridge the gap between online and offline associations (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, as cited in Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009).

Counts and Fisher (2010) approach the use of social networking as a source of social information: Sites such as Facebook are always-on social environments where people come together to exchange various types of information. Some of the information types they mention include: Awareness of social activities,
strengthening connections, and coordinating offline events. Wujcik (2010) suggests that social networking is used to build relationships between individuals that have common interests and engage in similar activities. One example of this is Facebook groups, through which users can meet and discuss common interests. Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009), in their factor analysis, identify socialising, entertainment, self-status seeking and information as the primary reasons for participating in Facebook groups.

Young, Dutta, and Dommety (2009) propose that listing ‘Single’ as a relationship status on Facebook may serve as a proxy to seeking a romantic partner. Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon, and Chew (2010) explore the use of social networking for learning participation in higher education. In their study they propose ways to close the gap between the learning space and personal (or social networking) space. Social networking sites are also increasingly exploited as key sources of information in court cases in the USA (Awsumb, 2010).

A large amount of research has been conducted with the aim of identifying the psychosocial and personality factors that would predict peoples’ engagement with social networking. McKenna and Bargh (as cited in Orr et al., 2009) argue that variables commonly associated with computer mediated communication (CMC), such as perceived conversational control, anonymity and bridging the barrier of physical attractiveness, are some of the features that make it an attractive communication medium. They further argue that these features, combined with individual and personality differences, will predict an individual’s pattern of CMC. Orr et al. (2009) explore one of these individual differences, namely shyness. In their study, shyness is positively correlated with both time spent on Facebook and attitude towards Facebook. This could be explained by the CMC features that appeal to these individuals. Through CMC, shy individuals can avoid the verbal and non-verbal cues associated with face-to-face interactions.

Pelling and White (2009) employ the theory of planned behaviour to predict people’s use of social networking sites. Using regression analysis, they show that positive attitudes and subjective norms significantly predict higher levels of social networking engagement. They also show that self-identifying with social networking is predictive of high levels of social networking use. According to Stryker’s identity theory, self-identity reflects the importance to the self-concept of engaging in a given behaviour (Stryker, as cited in Pelling & White, 2009). Therefore, an individual with a positive attitude towards social networking, who experiences strong social influence towards the use of social networking, and who self-identifies with social networking, will be more likely to engage in higher levels of social networking activity.

The need to belong has been found to correlate positively with willingness to become part of a social networking site (Gangadharbathla, as cited in Christofides et al., 2009). Correa, Hinsley, and Zúñiga (2010) show a positive correlation between
extraversion and openness to experience and the use of social networking sites. Furthermore, they find that emotional stability is negatively related to the use of social networking sites.

Other important issues emerging from research on the reasons for and nature of social networking engagement are the notions of identity formation and impression management. A key element here is the degree to which an individual perceives they are able to regulate and control an online representation of themselves (Selwyn, 2010).

**Disclosure**

Privacy involves a person’s right to control the use of personal information they disclose (Berman & Bruening, 2001). Privacy in a social networking setting refers to personal data that is deemed inaccessible to the general population (Richards, Etzioni, Kaplin, & Lee, as cited in Timm & Duven, 2008). Timm and Duven (2008) argue that two important factors should be considered when investigating issues of privacy: The intention with which the information was shared, and the expectation of privacy.

Most social networking sites use security settings to offer users the ability to control whether information on their profile is private or public (Awsumb, 2010). These security settings further enable the user to specify the amount of private information to which their contacts (or ‘friends’) have access. Full security control over privacy settings is one of the key features of social networking sites. Although available, a large number of individuals do not use these settings, or are not fully aware of their existence and functioning.

Peluchette and Karl (2010) report that content posted on Facebook by students ranges from socially acceptable information to explicit content (for example, photos or comments regarding alcohol abuse, sexual encounters and drug use). Their research suggests that the type of content disclosed depends on the personal image intended by the user (individuals who intended to portray a ‘wild’ image were more likely to post inappropriate content). In general, students made an attempt to disclose information that would be judged as socially acceptable by those viewing their profile (friends, family or employers), or they would only provide access to individuals who would not be offended by any explicit content posted.

Nosko et al. (2010) establish that people who are not in a relationship disclose more personal information than other users, potentially as a way to advertise or present themselves to potential romantic partners. A large number of people indeed use the internet as a dating medium (Madden & Lenhart, as cited in Nosko et al., 2010). Nosko et al. (2010) also found that women are no more likely than men to disclose a higher level of personal information (although women generally disclose more in traditional social interactions). It is possible that males feel less pressure
online to conform to the traditional male stereotype for social information disclosure. Christofides et al. (2009) found that the need for popularity is a significant predictor of information disclosure on Facebook, as a large number of Facebook friends could represent a source of social capital. They also indicate that higher levels of self-esteem as well as lower levels of trust predict a higher likelihood of controlling the information disclosed (through security settings). Disclosing information is also linked with the process of building new relationships. Information disclosure, which usually results in a reciprocal sharing of personal information from the opposite party to the relationship, increases trustworthiness (Henderson & Gilding, as cited in Christofides et al., 2009).

A number of negative consequences of inappropriate disclosure of information exist. These include negative employment assessment, suspension, or even criminal charges (Christofides et al., 2009). Added to these are concerns about security that include identity theft (when a large amount of personal information is disclosed), personal safety (when users are exposed to threats such as stalking) and social risk (when users self-identify with minority or marginalised groups) (Nosko et al., 2010). People also have access to an increased amount of personal information concerning, for example, their romantic partners (as a result of the public nature of information on Facebook). Some kinds of information could well be ambiguous, given the lack of context (for example, a past romantic partner making a comment on the Facebook wall). Situations akin to these are a common trigger for feelings of jealousy in romantic relationships (Muise et al., 2009). As Christofides et al. (2009) state: ‘Facebook . . . is changing the nature of privacy and the consequences of information disclosure’ (p. 341).

RESEARCH AIMS

This study explored the following principal question: What are the reasons why individuals use social networking sites, specifically Facebook? Are the primary reasons information-based, that is, to stay in contact with friends, to organise social events or to keep up to date with the endeavours of others? Alternatively, does the use of social networking sites support other needs or provide a more suitable medium for interpersonal communication given the psychosocial and personality characteristics of users?

A subsidiary aim of this study was to explore the processes involved in the use of Facebook. Three issues were explored in this regard. First, we explored how the notion of disclosure is used to meet the needs associated with the use of Facebook. The questions asked included: What types of information is disclosed and why? Does information disclosed depend on the audience? How do users manage privacy through the rules they uphold for adding new friends to their network? Second, we explored the differences and similarities between social networking and face-to-face
interactions. What are the specific characteristics of mediated communication and why does it appeal to participants? Third, we explored emerging social networking norms that govern online interaction. What are the dos and don’ts of Facebook? Has a common system of norms developed or is this a subjective process that differs from person to person?

METHOD

Design

This was a qualitative study framed by the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, is a qualitative approach based on systematic data collection and analysis and subsequent theory development. These processes (data collection, analysis and theory development) are closely interlinked. A grounded theory researcher does not start with a preconceived theory, but instead allows theory to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2009). Grounded theory research takes the form of a series of iterations that is guided by data gathered from various possible sources. This process involves continually reviewing the data, refining questions, and re-evaluating the concepts that emerge from this process (Jacelon & O’Dell, 2005). Concepts are further modified by comparison to new sources of data as these become available (Burck, 2005; Glaser, 2002). It is therefore a dynamic, open-ended research process that is particularly appropriate for explorative research and the development of contextually specific theoretical concepts.

Data collection and sampling

The use of multiple data sources is desirable in grounded theory research (Patton, as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 2009). Data in this study were collected through two avenues: Interviews and ethnographic notes. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted mainly of open ended questions. The main aim of the interviews was to elicit descriptive and rich responses from participants, including meanings, experiences, opinions and ideologies regarding the use of Facebook. Because grounded theory research is an iterative process that does not separate data collection and analysis in an absolute sense, interview questions were changed and refined throughout the process. The questions that did not elicit a rich narrative response, or were confusing to participants, were removed. Ad hoc questions and impromptu discussions were also explored during interviews. This process led to additional questions being added to the interview schedule. Ethnographic notes included observations regarding the types of information disclosed on Facebook, the process of interaction of users and our personal experiences as frequent Facebook users.
To be included in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: They had to have access to the internet, be frequent users of Facebook (on Facebook almost every day) and be part of the same cohort of individuals commonly referred to as the technological generation (born between 1970 and 1990). Given these criteria, purposeful and convenience sampling was used to extract cases that could provide rich feedback to interview questions. Sampling was done from the friends on the first author’s Facebook profile. As the purpose of this study was not generalisation, the fact that this is not a representative sample is not a concern. These individuals were approached mainly because they fit the research criteria and were easily accessible.

The age of participants ranged from 22 to 31. Five are white South African females while three are white South African males. One resides in Texas, USA, two in London, UK, while the others live in the Western Cape. All interviews were conducted in Afrikaans. Coding and analysis of data were done using the original Afrikaans text; only the extracts used as illustrative examples in this paper were translated into English. After eight participants had been interviewed, we were satisfied that an adequate level of data saturation had been achieved. Where possible the interviews were conducted at the residence of participants or in a quiet public place and were recorded. The remaining interviews were conducted online.

**Data analysis**

The analysis of data proceeded by means of increasingly discriminate forms of coding. At first key sections of transcribed text were highlighted in Microsoft Word. In addition to this, initial open coding was performed under each paragraph of highlighted text. This process was used to identify initial descriptive categories within the data gathered.

We also wrote memos and ethnographic notes to accompany initial categories. Initial categories and key notes for all transcribed text were moved to Microsoft Excel. In Microsoft Excel, Axial coding was used to build and link the data in new ways. Key notes and coded text were reorganised to form core categories and sub-categories. This process also involved comparison and linking of categories. This allowed the identification of the emerging concepts and theories that are documented in this research report.

**Ethical considerations**

The background and aims of the study were discussed with participants prior to conducting the interviews. All participation was voluntary and fully confidential in nature. Fictitious names were assigned for the purpose of publication. All participants
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The grounded theory analysis revealed two main reasons for using Facebook: Information exchange and socialising. In addition to reasons for use, the concept of disclosure was also investigated, to explore how participants manage the individuals (friends) that have access to their Facebook profile. Finally, the study explored emergent social networking norms and the similarities and differences between social networking and face-to-face interactions.

General comments regarding Facebook use

Participants generally spend at least an hour a day on Facebook, with some spending several hours a day. The level of importance that participants ascribed to Facebook in their day-to-day lives differed significantly. Some saw the application as a nice-to-have (Andrea: ‘It is nice to have, but if it is not there, I won’t miss it.’), while others reported that they couldn’t live without it (Sally: ‘as more people started to join, the more I began to think, gosh this is awesome, I cannot go one day without it!’). The groups of people with whom users frequently interact also differed among participants. Some reported that they mainly interact with close friends (even though their Facebook network extend beyond these people) whilst others said they communicate with a wider group – people with whom they would not normally interact or with whom they would not feel comfortable interacting face-to-face.

Participants judged Facebook to be a generally positive experience. There were some exceptions, especially regarding negative content to which users are unwillingly exposed. As Michelle observed:

You are forced to see things that you don’t want to see . . . in the past you won’t have walked up to an ex-girlfriend and told her, check out these photos of my new girlfriend . . . you know, these are things you really should not see.

When asked how they would feel if they were unable to use Facebook for a month, the majority of participants commented that they would probably struggle, but that this could also be a blessing in disguise. Some participants further explained that Facebook has become such an integral part of their lives that it now represents a dependency. As Bob noted:

I will feel very good about it, definitely, I am beginning to get a bit irritated with Facebook . . . It is like, if you do something too much it starts to irritate you (. . .) Yes definitely, it’s all over now, it is definitely an addiction.
Varied responses were received regarding changes in Facebook use over time. Increased use was associated with increased internet access (for example, uncapped ADSL and internet at work) and decreased use was associated with a decrease in interest or focusing the time spent on Facebook on the parts of the application that are judged most useful. An increase in the awareness and importance of privacy settings was also mentioned.

**Facebook as information exchange**

The main use of Facebook according to our participants is facilitating the exchange of information. Participants differed with regard to the extent and preferred method of information exchange. Ignoring personal communication (e-mail, chat), some participants preferred only to extract content from Facebook (e.g., reading information on others’ profiles or looking at the photos they have uploaded), while others also shared personal information with their network of friends (e.g., through status updates and by uploading photos). Hence, the theme of exchange of information was further divided into three sub-themes: Knowledge, sharing and personal communication.

**Knowledge**

Humans are inherently interested or curious concerning other peoples’ lives. Facebook, one could say, enables people to engage in a form of legitimate social espionage, or voyeurism. Knowledge here refers to the kinds of information about others that users can extract from Facebook. In our sample this included awareness of what is happening in other peoples’ lives, where they are, how they feel, their social and cultural opinions and interests. Edward commented as follows:

> It gives you an edge because you know what is going on in your friends’ lives, or you can make an effort to find out. Then you can act with increased tact . . . You can act with more empathy if you know what is happening, like your mom is sick, say for example you made a status update about it, then I can actually ask how your mom is doing.

Some participants, however, noted the potential lack of authenticity of information extracted from Facebook (for example, reading a friend’s status update, or a change in relationship status). As this is public rather than personally shared knowledge, using this as content in conversations might lack the authenticity of face-to-face interaction. According to Edward:

> I feel like a stalker, even though I know people are on Facebook so that others can see them. I feel like a stalker when I tell somebody, I see on Facebook that your dog died, or whatever . . . then it feels kind of, get a life, you know?
Information that can be extracted from Facebook also relates to social events and discussion forums (this will be further discussed under the theme of Socialising).

Sharing

The flipside of knowledge, according to our analysis, is sharing. Participants share information with others through their status updates, wall posts, photos and personal information. Anna noted:

> People who don’t update their statuses irritate me because, I mean, then there is nothing going on in their lives, because it is blank. Is your life blank? OK, then you should never go on Facebook because Facebook is about the whole world, and it is precisely there to share things with the world.

The way in which shared information is presented, provided an interesting discussion point during the interviews. Do individuals present information in a certain way in order for others to form a positive view of their lives? None of the participants initially, and explicitly, listed impression management as one of the main reasons for using Facebook. Anna commented that it would be risky to present an untrue view of yourself:

> you can totally create someone who the world will think you are, but if they meet you in real life they will have a rude awakening, I think.

When probed, most participants agreed that they would rarely upload content that portrays them in a negative light. Sally explained it as follows:

> Yes, I will definitely stress that I had a good weekend, so that other people can see, jeez but Sally had a great weekend! What did she do? I wonder what she did?, and the photos I upload will show how I enjoy myself.

Claudia agreed:

> You will obviously portray yourself in a positive way . . . yes I think people appear as good as they can . . . this is what everybody does, if you meet face-to-face, the first week people always put their best foot forward.

We contend that, for many users, a significant amount of (at least subconscious) impression management accompany the use of Facebook. Some individuals spend a significant amount of time on Facebook managing their image and are easily upset when others perform actions that could potentially damage this image (this point will be further expanded in the next section). Other users, view Facebook as either distinct from their persona (Michelle: ‘I think Facebook is like an Avatar. It is something like me but in a different life. It’s almost like reincarnation.’) or simply do not care that much. We would view the dynamics underlying impression management on Facebook as being analogous to face-to-face interaction.
One method of direct impression management comes through the uploading of visual content (photos). The main type of photos uploaded onto Facebook, according to our participants, relate to social events. The purpose of uploading these types of photos is sharing social experiences with others, as Bob explains:

*Let's say you were at a cool party and all your friends were there, then you upload it and all your friends see it, people comment and you laugh and you joke about the evening.*

Other reasons mentioned by participants include sharing what is going on in their lives, advertising cool holiday destinations and uploading photos that put them in a positive light (Anna: ‘*Who will upload a lonesome photo of themselves*?’). Significantly, participants claimed to go through a fairly strict filtering process when uploading photos. Related to this, some participants claimed to get aggravated when somebody else tags them in a photo that they believe creates a negative impression (for example, they are drunk, smoking a cigarette, or just don’t look good). As Michelle noted:

*No I hate it. There is nothing that scares me as much as to see, you were tagged in 2 photos . . . There is nothing that upsets me as much because you don’t know what people will put on Facebook. I always think about other people, like for example, I won’t upload hideous photos of them, except when it is funny.*

This aggravation, however, was not frequently experienced by our participants, given the level of mutual respect that governs these types of processes on Facebook. (Mutual respect is further discussed in the section on disclosure and privacy.)

*Personal communication*

Our participants further claimed to use Facebook as a communication medium. Communication in this context is defined as an interactive process of sending and receiving information, and is therefore distinguished from the distinct concepts of knowledge (receiving) and sharing (sending) that is discussed above. Communication includes e-mail and instant messaging (chat), for which other applications such as Hotmail, MSN Messenger, G-mail and Yahoo were commonly used in the past. Facebook now enables users to integrate these methods of communication with other (abovementioned) functions into one platform.

Communication on Facebook is, according to our participants, mainly used to keep in touch with people. This was especially relevant for participants who live overseas or those who have friends or family living overseas. Anna discussed how she uses Facebook to keep in contact with people in South Africa:

*When I am far away from home, it is a much easier way to see what my sisters are doing, or what my friends in South Africa are doing, what is going on in their lives, especially when they upload photos.*
In this specific instance, communication is closely related to knowledge and sharing. For the distance relationships described by Anna, Facebook substitutes interpersonal contact and facilitates the continuation of most elements of a normal relationship. This is done through communication (e-mail and chat), sharing visual content and the ability to be informed of what is happening in the lives of these friends. Compared to the past (where these relationships were mainly managed through e-mail), this process significantly increases the ease with which people manage relationships across continents.

Facebook communication further enabled our participants to reconnect with old friends whom they might not have seen since primary or secondary school. It also facilitated the building of new relationships (friendship, romantic connections or networking) that would not otherwise have been possible (or would have been more difficult). Bob explained this in the following way:

Yes, I have made good friends. People that I have met once or twice, we become Facebook friends, we start chatting, and then I would suggest, let’s go for coffee or something. ( . . . ) Let's say you meet a girl and you ask her number, then she will immediately get the impression that you want to date her, but on Facebook, if you befriend her first, you understand, it is not that personal, then from there you can easily take it forward.

**Facebook as socialising**

Socialising is closely related to communication but usually involves more than two people. Sharing information with others gives participants the feeling of being connected, of being part of a larger network of people. Even for participants that do not share a large amount of information with others, Facebook provided a feeling of social belonging, as Andrew explained:

*It is a form of socialising that I will not have in my day to day life. I get my social fix from it to a large extent. I feel less isolated yes, definitely. I think I would have felt more isolated if I wasn’t on Facebook so regularly. I feel like I am part of some social fabric.*

It is incredibly easy to organise a social event using Facebook. In the past one had to e-mail, phone or send a text message to all your friends. Now all you have to do is create an event on Facebook and set up a guest list. People that you may have forgotten can also take notice of the event (if the event is not classified as ‘private’) and can indicate whether they will be attending. Common interest groups (clubs, restaurants, bands) also invite members to events that they organise. According to our participants, the social space on Facebook was also used for utility information and feedback: Notifying friends of a stolen phone or a new mobile number, informing friends that you are looking for a new flat, or asking for advice when buying a camera. Anna noted:

*It is like [internet website] because people advertise so many things on Facebook, where*
they say, I need a housemate or I am looking for a new car. Do any of you have any advice?

Social entertainment was provided through status updates, joke groups and laughing at the silly things others do or say. Andrew explained how he is entertained through watching people on Facebook:

It’s like people watching. Yes, I also watch conversations on Facebook, like if I was in a restaurant eavesdropping on people, to see how people interact.

Michelle finds it more entertaining to be central to this process and specifically makes status updates to elicit feedback from her group of friends:

The most time on Facebook I spend on status updates. For me it is a bit of an experiment, to see which people comment actively.

A further type of socialising our participants mentioned may be called exploration. Andrew noted in this regard his experience regarding a group on Facebook and the comments of its members:

. . . a gossip program on TV, I discovered this the other day, it is a whole other mindset, there’s different types of people and then I read their comments, then I go onto their profiles. Sometimes I just get the urge to check out random pockets of humanity . . . I am a bit of a voyeur, yes.

Exploration can involve accessing strangers’ profiles, common interest groups or forums. For this specific purpose Andrew went as far as creating fake female profiles:

Yes, I started [female name], it was basically for stalking purposes . . .

The notion of disclosure and privacy

Privacy and security were extremely important to all our participants. The awareness of social threat was noted by Edward:

It is so stupid when people make their information public. They give their home address, mobile number, e-mail address, everything is there, that’s not cool. You must know by now you don’t put things like that on the internet, especially not with photos, because we’ve got some sick people out there man.

The notion of privacy extended to concerns about the opinions people outside one’s group of friends (e.g., a prospective employer) could form of one when looking at the content on one’s Facebook profile. All participants reported to have set their privacy settings to ‘friends only’ (i.e., only Facebook friends can view their status updates, photos and other content). The selection of new friends (through friend...
invites) therefore became integral for them in managing the disclosure of content on Facebook.

The decision about when somebody new ‘qualified’ to be added to an existing circle of friends differed among participants. Participants did agree that they would easily add people that they already know as new friends. This included people that they have met once or twice in social situations. Most participants said they would not add somebody they did not know as a friend, even if they share a number of mutual friends (mutual friends are indicated when viewing another person’s profile). Andrea noted:

*I accept everybody with whom I have had contact and who I recognise, even if I don’t want to be friends with them because I don’t want people to feel bad. Imagine I see somebody like that in real life, then I will know that he knows that I rejected him on Facebook.*

All participants claimed to be willing to add their extended family as friends, yet 50 per cent of participants decided not to add their parents.

Participants were further asked what the number of friends reveals about somebody. Responses varied. Some participants claimed that nobody truly knows more than 100 people. As Sally (who has more than 700 friends on Facebook) explained:

*I don’t know if people like me say, I have so many friends, I look so cool, because every idiot knows that you only know 100 or 80 or whatever of your friends personally.*

Some participants also mentioned that they believe people with 700 to 1000 friends actively search and add new friends (even to the extent of adding people they do not know). Surprisingly, most participants believe that a high number of friends (e.g., 1000) actually tell you something about a person’s personality: That he or she is a social person. Bob explains:

*I think it definitely says something about a person, not necessarily that they know 1000 people, but it says, this guy goes out, meets people, is not afraid to meet people . . .*

Claudia also confirmed this opinion:

*It says they are social and really network a lot and have been places, done things, have met many people and are easy-going . . .*

Participants were all aware of the likely audience (friends) that could access their Facebook content (Andrea: ‘I think carefully about the image that I present as I have such a variety of friends from different walks of life.’). Those who befriend their close family members apply an even stronger filtration system to the information shared on Facebook. Bob shared a specific situation:

*I didn’t want to tell anybody that I broke up with my girlfriend, then I just got fed up*
and I changed my relationship status to single, but I did not tell anybody. Eleven o’clock at night my mum called me to tell me, my aunt saw it, then my mum wanted to know what was going on?

According to the participants, there often exists a level of mutual respect between friends regarding privacy on Facebook. Participants claimed to be aware of the likely audience (friends of friends) when posting information on their friends’ profile. They therefore usually followed the same rules as used for managing content on their own profile.

**Contrasting social networking to face-to-face interaction**

What are the main differences, according to our participants, between social networking and face-to-face interaction? To what extent do these differences support the reasons for using Facebook? It is common for people to be worried that the conversation might dry up when engaging in face-to-face contact. It is not unsurprising that most participants commented that they find it easier to manage certain aspects of relationships online and that they can engage with others on Facebook without experiencing social anxiety. This was seen as especially relevant for building new relationships. Claudia mentioned the perceived conversational control involved in Facebook interactions:

> If it gets weird for one of you then you can always say, I gotta go, or you can end it, or you can just log off, you don’t even have to say goodbye because people can just assume it is an internet problem . . . I think it is a very safe environment.

Participants found it easier to talk about sensitive subjects (Michelle: ‘while you probably won’t do it around a table of people, you have guts when you know that there is no personal interaction’) and also found it easier to escape when confronted about things they said. Claudia mentioned:

> I can be more daring, because you can always say it was a joke, because there is no body language involved.

In some instances, the secure nature of mediated communication also made it easier for our participants to interact with certain types of people on Facebook. As Anna explained:

> With this specific guy I don’t feel comfortable to chat to in real life. It is people that, for example, went to school with me, what do I really have to say to this person?

What, according to our participants, was lacking in mediated communication were the non-verbal cues that give an indication of intended meaning. We find it interesting that none of the participants mentioned the degree of misunderstanding that is common in interaction without non-verbal cues. A possible explanation is
the type of relationship that was presupposed for the interview questions, namely a relationship that is not emotionally close or has not yet formed completely. In this type of relationship, where small talk is generally the rule, benefits can certainly outweigh drawbacks.

**Emergent social networking norms**

Participants were asked to discuss the actions that they feel are inappropriate on Facebook. Their responses suggest a high degree of similarity between social norms on Facebook and traditional social interaction norms. Michelle mentioned:

*For me, I think that anything that you won’t do in your normal life you should not do on Facebook because it will boomerang and come back to you somehow.*

Participants noted that the following actions should be avoided: Uploading photos showing excessive drinking, nudity, or drug use. Other inappropriate actions they mentioned included swearing, hate speech, personal arguments or vendettas, talking about sex, politics, racism, blasphemy and religion. Bob explains:

*Once I made my status update this quote by someone that was a bit offensive, you know, to religious people, and I think I lost eight friends within half an hour.*

A further issue that was explored in the interviews was that of approaching somebody that you do not know on Facebook. Given the public nature of Facebook, it is not uncommon to receive a message from a complete stranger (this is especially relevant to women, who could be more exposed). The majority of participants mentioned that they viewed this action as largely inappropriate. Some participants claimed that they would weigh up the content and context of the message to decide whether to respond or not. Michelle notes:

*It will depend on the substance of the message. If it is something like, you look so hot on your profile and I think we should be friends, then no, but if it is like, I met one of your girlfriends and she told me about you and I found you on Facebook by coincidence, then yes, why not.*

Participants further noted that they would be very careful when they responded to a stranger and would avoid sharing too much personal information before establishing some rapport. Related to social networking norms, the following actions were noted as irritating to participants: People with excessive photos of themselves, as they are judged to seek attention; over-sharing emotions, for example, ‘I am so happy’; and making personal messages public. As Sally explained:

*A friend of mine made her status update, I love you so much [name], and you are my whole life, thanks for everything. Okay that is great, everybody that reads her status will know she obviously loves her boyfriend but it is my opinion that she should rather write it on his wall . . .*
A further action that irritated participants is when people randomly started chatting to them using Facebook chat. Michelle mentioned:

... I don’t chat on Facebook. A lot of people are always online, I’ve done it maybe twice. I hate it because it’s like constantly getting text messages from strangers. For me it is like, you are on my Facebook profile but I won’t necessarily chat to you. It is like when somebody you haven’t seen for 10 years randomly says, hi what’s up?

For this reason, some participants deactivated the chat function on their profile page; in other words, their friends were unable to see when they were online and they could not be contacted via Facebook chat.

CONCLUSION

Social networking sites such as Facebook represent something of a new frontier in human social interaction, communication and community development. It is rapidly altering the kinds of interactions people engage in, the nature of relationships they form and maintain, and the strategies and rules of engagement they employ in the process. It is shifting the boundaries between private and public spheres, between general and personalised media. It is reducing social distance but also stratifying and recalibrating social distinctions. This study investigated the reasons people give for using the social networking site Facebook and explored some of the emerging norms regulating this new form of computer mediated social interaction. We hope to have made, with this exploratory article, a small contribution to what we believe should become a major focus in the social psychology of language and communication.

ENDNOTE

1. Pseudonyms, which were chosen by the authors, are used throughout the article.
F. KRUGER AND D. PAINTER

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Frederik Kruger is a qualified actuary by trade, but his interests also include psychology, social media and travelling. He completed his postgraduate studies in psychology at Stellenbosch University in 2010. He currently lives and works in London.

Desmond Painter is a senior lecturer in psychology at Stellenbosch University. He teaches social psychology, critical psychology and qualitative research methods. He has co-edited two academic books: Research in Practice with Martin Terre Blanche and Kevin Durrheim and Interiors: A History of Psychology in South Africa with Clifford van Ommen. He has published numerous articles and book reviews in academic journals and regularly contributes articles on social and cultural issues to Afrikaans newspapers. He is an avid blogger and an amateur poet. He loves a wife, a cat, and music.

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